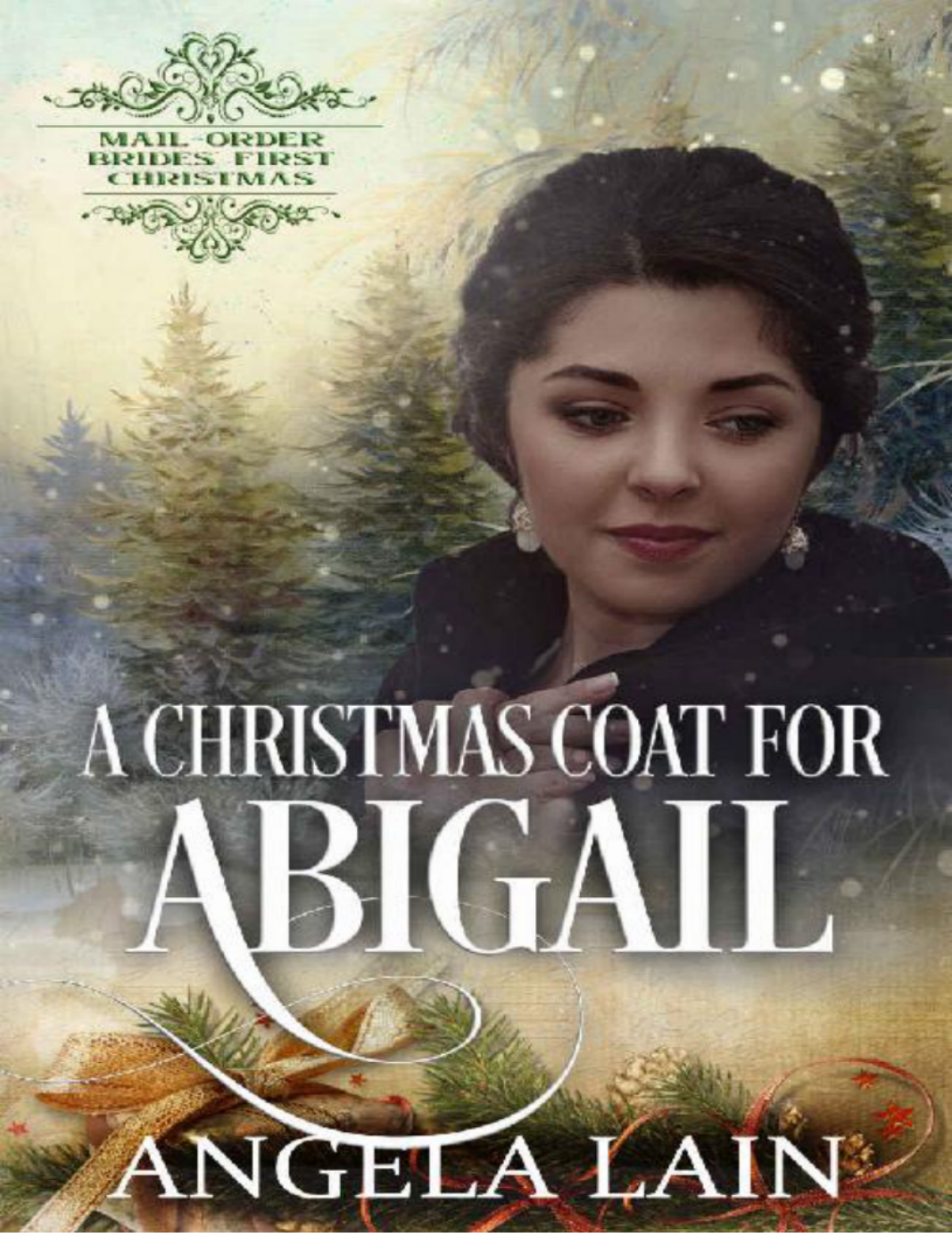

MAIL-ORDER
BRIDES FIRST
CHRISTMAS
A CHRISTMAS COAT FOR
ABIGAIL
ANGELA LAIN

A CHRISTMAS COAT FOR ABIGAIL

BOOK 1
MAIL-ORDER BRIDES' FIRST CHRISTMAS



ANGELA LAIN

Cover by Blackwidow Books

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Contents

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

CHAPTER ONE

27th October 1874

David Ferguson walked down the main street of his home town Jessop Creek, seeing it with fresh eyes. Almost two years had passed since he'd last been in this small Wyoming town. David had been born on the Ferguson Ranch, few miles from here. His father had settled and set up one of the first ranching enterprises in the territory. From what he could see the town was thriving. He had spied a couple of new businesses, including The Five Card Stud, a flashy looking dance hall. In days gone by it would have been the first place which drew him, but his attitude had changed since he'd traveled and seen a bit more of this country.

Before he had ridden away this place had seemed like his prison. Indeed, the jail house had seen him as a short time resident just before he left! That incident, and the arrival of a certain Miss Charis Lovell at the family ranch, had been the beginning of a new chapter in his life.

Charis.

That feisty, red-headed spitfire.

He had left because she had made him see the light, realize the error of his ways. He was a little in love with her for her insight and clear thinking. Charis had married his brother Ben, the town deputy. He had left soon after, fairly certain she'd had no idea how he had felt about her. This home-coming might prove short lived if he found he could not accept the situation.

Home.

Yes, the place felt like home, not like a prison.

He looked along the street to the barbers. His moustache needed a trim and he would get himself a proper shave and a haircut before he headed out to the ranch to see his family.

The prodigal son was about to return.

"Ferguson!" The shout rang across the street. "Hey pard, is it really you? I thought you'd be a famous gunslinger by this time, or dead in some Texas arroyo."

David turned to greet his erstwhile friend, now hurrying across the roadway, well aware of the look he got from a respectable couple walking along the street towards him. *This* was the reason he had ridden away. Before he had left, he had been on the way to such a fate; during his adventures in Texas, and several places in between, he moved on to better things.

Tom Benton slapped him on the back.

"Come on in for a jar or two."

David glanced back to see the old saloon just a few strides away.

"I don't …"

"Come on, cowboy, for old times' sake."

Old times that David had put behind him! But Tom was pushing him to the door, and they *had* been friends. What could one drink matter? It was his past.

He was persuaded through the door.

He knew the moment he walked in that it was a mistake.

There at the table sat Carl Boyd and Jeb Cornish, along with two men he did not know.

"Wal, look what the cat dragged in," Boyd drawled. "Sit down, pretty boy, have a whisky, plenty in the bottle."

"No, thank you." Boyd eyed him belligerently. David changed his tone. The last thing he wanted was trouble on the first day he rode back into town. "Not whisky. I would prefer a beer. Long ride, dusty throat. You know how it is."

His old friends accepted the words, and the beer was plonked in front of him. David was obliged to sit. He would drink the one and leave. He had other places to be, and this sort of life appealed to him no longer. He had spread his wings a little, refusing to dig himself a miserable hole caused by drink and resentment.

"This here is Paulie Carne and Peter Wenham," Benton introduced the strangers. "Old friend of ours, David Ferguson."

David nodded a greeting, neither man seemed inclined to offer a handshake.

Jeb Cornish was holding forth about some letters from a girl. David wasn't really listening, all he could think was how sad this was at this time of day. Barely noon and they were all getting roostered. He couldn't help but wonder about their livelihoods.

Maybe he should intervene?

He looked around his one-time friends and realized any attempt would fail. When he had been one of them, he wouldn't have listened either. It had taken that jail episode to change his ways, that and a feisty woman.

"Wassa time?" Jeb stared blearily at the clock on the wall.

"Half-arter noon," Benton replied.

"Sheesh." Jeb got to his feet, staggering a little. "Gotta go, gotta meet the stage. Who's comin'?"

They all declined, Jeb turned to David. "You comin'?"

David saw a great excuse to leave the saloon without offending anyone else. "Sure thing." He drained the final inch of his beer and accompanied the rather unsteady Jeb to the door. Once on the street David concluded that he probably needed to go to the stage stop with

Jeb, to prevent him from walking into some respectable citizen, or under any other traffic on the way. Of course the street was peaceful, but Jeb was on his way to being roaring drunk, and although David thought he probably deserved the rest of the day in the jail, that would involve him being arrested, probably by Ben Ferguson, his older brother. Not to assist a man who had been his friend wouldn't reflect well upon his own character, and that had begun to mean something recently.

They arrived at the stage stop before the vehicle was visible on the horizon. David pushed Jeb onto a seat, and concluded he could now leave him. The man may well fall asleep before the stage arrived.

His curiosity got the better of him.

"Why are we here?"

"I gotta meet someone off the stage."

"Someone important?"

"I am here to meet a *very important* lady. I am here to meet, and marry, my mail-order bride. What do you think of that?"

David stared at him in disbelief. The man was as drunk as a skunk, and he was talking of meeting, and *marrying*, a lady.

"You can't do that, you are drunk."

"I have to. She gets offen the stage and we marry immediately. That way no-one can back out of the deal."

"You are not serious? Surely you can't…"

"Of course I can! Needed a bit of Dutch courage, but now I am fine." Jeb glanced about. "Of course, I'm gonna need a couple of witnesses. Y'all can do that, hey?"

Witnesses? Could he *really* be serious? David doubted the Judge would conduct a service with one of the couple so obviously not in full control of his faculties. And what of his potential bride? Surely she would take one look and refuse to participate.

David regarded his erstwhile friend. The man must be fantasizing about this. Maybe she wouldn't arrive?

"Jeb, is this true? And if it is, do you really want your potential bride to see you in such a state?"

"Of course it's true, and I ain't in a state, just needed a little… relaxing."

David shook his head in disbelief, any more relaxing and he would be horizontal. He could hardly believe that a year or so ago he would probably have been right there with Jeb, drinking to his future, and preparing to shock the petticoats off his mail-order bride, should she actually show up.

It was also a mystery to David that Jeb appeared to have sent for a mail-order bride, when, as the son of a small farmer on the outskirts of town, he had little to call his own. How would he support her?

Would the girl be expected to live in that small shack with Jeb and his father?

"Jeb, where are you going to live?"

"In the cabin o'course, my bed is big enough for two. It'll be good to have a woman to do the cookin' and the dirty work, washin' and such. And think of the *other* benefits. She'll be there to keep me satisfied *whenever* I need it!"

Drunk or not, his tone held a note of gloating. David felt ill. Did this poor girl have even the smallest idea of what awaited her here?

"What if she doesn't like you?"

"She'll have to. I've paid her fare. She's been bought and she can't argue, don't you worry about that."

"Exactly how did you convince a girl to marry you?"

"Ahh." Jeb tapped his nose knowingly. "I used me noggin. Got Irish Rose from the cat house to give me some pointers. She helped me write some right nice letters, all flowery about moonlit walks and things."

David stared in disbelief. That Jeb had been crafty enough to enlist female help was surprising, but flowery letters? Letters which no doubt painted an entirely false picture of the situation in Jessop Creek, leave alone the state of Jeb's home life? This girl had been spun a web of lies, and if she told Jeb exactly what she thought of the matter, David would not be one bit surprised.

"And you are certain she is on this stage?"

"Got me a telegraph, just yesterday. Said she'd be here today."

David decided the shave and haircut would have to wait, seeing how this whole thing panned out seemed far more important.

CHAPTER TWO

The stage coach was hot. It was a different kind of hot to Mississippi, that was a muggy damp heat, this was dry and dusty. The day had started cool, and it probably still was outside, but the temperature had climbed swiftly inside the coach. The windows were covered by long rawhide curtains which were supposed to keep out the dust, instead they seemed to increase the overpowering stuffiness within the coach.

Abby wanted to lift the curtains to see the countryside beyond. This was the land which would become her home. She had watched the land change as she had traveled. Her hometown had been on the great Mississippi river, there had been many thick woods, and few hills. Since then she had seen many different views, the open prairie had been a scary sight to a girl used to trees! Now she was heading towards mountains, real mountains, and she wanted to see. It would lessen the discomfort of this journey if she could watch the land pass by.

Abby couldn't remember ever being more uncomfortable. This was possibly the roughest part of the long journey from her home. She had been traveling for days on a series of boats, trains and stage coaches with little chance to rest or tidy herself. How was she ever going to appear prepared for a wedding ceremony? She only hoped her future husband wasn't too shocked and disappointed by her disheveled appearance.

Mr. Jebediah Cornish had sounded a nice man. If he had not, she would never have made this commitment. She and her mother had pored over the letters she had received, and had both decided that Mr. Cornish had written some beautiful words. How could such a man not be a pleasant prospective husband?

Miss Abigail Baraquin knew exactly what she had signed up for; she had discussed the whole thing at length with her mother before committing herself to be a mail-order bride at the age of nineteen. It had been a relief for her poor mother, who had spent the last five years trying to keep her precious daughter out of the clutches of her own boss.

Athene Baraquin, her wonderful mother, was what she was, a sometime exotic dancer and a hostess for the gentlemen. In other words, she was whore. She'd not always sold herself in such a manner. Married to Abby's father, a French Creole boatman, she'd been a mother at seventeen and they had been a happy little family, living in Vidalia. Abby had been eight years old when her father had set off on

his last trip up river. He had not fought in the war, not on any regular battle front, but he had remained on the riverboats, assisting in the movement of anything and everything required by the troops. That had made no difference to his fate. From what they had been told, the boat had hit a shoal and all hands were lost. Life on the riverboats was fraught with such danger, war or not. After that, they had moved over the river to Natchez and Athene had done what she needed to survive.

Mr. Piers Laurendine, the owner of the high class, fancy bordello where Athene worked, had long been trying to entice Abby into his den of iniquity. He had told her she could merely dance for the customers, and serve their drinks. Neither Abby nor her mother was that naïve. Athene wanted something far better for her daughter, but the choices were few when you had nothing in the world but a job and the room that went with it. Abby had earned a few dollars as a cleaning girl in a boarding house, and in the bordello in the early mornings. She had stayed as far from the bordello as she could while her mother was working, returning only to sleep in their tiny room.

To be a mail-order bride had seemed a sensible way forward. To become a wife, with a household and a family of her own had to be the prime objective for Abby. From there, Abby had thought further ahead. Once she was settled and running her household, she would ask her husband if her mother could come north to join them. Surely a decent man could not refuse such a request?

Here she was, on her way to a new life. In fact, if her traveling companions were to be believed, she would arrive at Jessop Creek very shortly.

A distant plume of dust rising from the trail heralded the arrival of the stage.

Jeb Cornish staggered to his feet and stood awaiting his bride, along with two passengers who were waiting to board and travel further.

The stage pulled up in a cloud of dust; as it settled two men jumped down, and one turned to assist a young lady to the ground.

Jeb's bride.

David stared in disbelief.

She was beautiful.

Dark hair, swept up under a neat bonnet, gleaming earrings lay against her creamy neck. She was dressed in a dark lavender dress, which set off her hair and complexion admirably. The neckline plunged slightly to reveal more skin than was normally exposed anywhere but in the saloon.

Just how had Jeb Cornish managed to secure such a woman?

Why did such a beauty need a man like Jeb Cornish? Why did she need a mail-order arrangement at all? Did her mode of dress reveal her origins to be the dance halls? Did it matter if that was true?

"Mr. Cornish?" She stepped forward and David got a glimpse of fine dark eyes beneath the brim of the hat, as she looked from one to the other of the men on the sidewalk. They were all standing transfixed.

Jeb stepped down into the road.

"There you are, 'bout time too." He gave an exaggerated bow and almost toppled over. "Greetings to you, Miss Baraquin. I hope you are ready for a change in your fortunes?"

"Excuse me?"

"We are off to be wed of course. Come on, Ferguson, you said you would be a witness." Jeb grabbed her arm, pulling her up the step onto the sidewalk.

She stepped out of the road, and then resisted, pulling back against his grip. "You are *drunk*!"

David heard one of the men on the sidewalk snort with laughter, and he had to stamp on his immediate flare of temper. Mocking the poor girl was cruel.

"I keep a'tellin' you, I'm relaxed, me an' the boys celebrated early," Jeb declared.

"You are drunk. I'm not stupid, I've seen enough drunks in my life to know."

Abby knew she had snapped. For a few seconds she had felt faint, now she was angry. All ideas of showing how polite and refined she could be had flown, whorehouse attitude was what he would get. Abby hadn't spent her formative years in a den of iniquity without learning a few things.

She twisted her arm to escape from his grip, and managed momentarily, but unfortunately for her, he wasn't quite drunk enough for it to surprise him. He was on her in a second, almost knocking her to the floor as she tried to escape his grasp. Having caught her again, he began to push and pull her along the sidewalk.

"Les' go. We gonna see the judge."

"No!" Abby struggled. "I will not marry you."

He stopped and turned on her. "Bought an' paid for, thas' the contract."

And it was true.

Abby stared back at him in despair. How had this gone so very

wrong in a matter of minutes? The only way out of this was to pay him back the money he had spent, if he would accept it. The agency had been very clear about this, no responsibility was accepted for situations like this, which were beyond their control. If this man dragged her to the judge, and the contract was fulfilled despite her protests, she would never escape. She would become his property, to do with as he wished.

Paying him off would take far more than the meagre few dollars in her purse. Her mind was in turmoil. She knew it would do no good to panic, somehow she had to escape, to run. It would mean leaving all her worldly goods, little though they were, but she had to run before this contract was signed. This was so unexpected. She'd arrived here expecting to wed the writer of those lovely letters, instead she was facing a belligerent drunk, who had seemed to think she should be grateful for his attentions.

Oh, how she wished she had followed the lead of some of the whorehouse girls, and carried a knife in her pocket!

David had seen more than enough.

He had stood back, knowing it was not his business, but Jeb Cornish was behaving appallingly badly towards a lady. So she might not be exactly a *lady*, and she had signed up to be his wife, but he knew that Jeb had misled her, lied to her.

He watched as Jeb hustled her towards the judge's office. The girl had stopped fighting him. Maybe she had decided it wasn't so bad?

He thought of the only words she had spoken, a determined denial of any desire to marry a drunk, and concluded that she didn't want this. He had told Jeb he would be a witness, so he had the excuse to follow. But he would not bear witness to such a travesty, maybe he could persuade the judge not to perform the ceremony?

David stepped along the sidewalk after his sometime friend. He may have been no angel in his past, but he would never dream of treating a woman this way, even if he was roaring drunk!

The young woman was still dragging her feet, but she didn't fight again until they arrived outside the judge's office.

She made her opinions known. "I'm not going in there with you."

Aside of exclaiming that Jeb was drunk, she'd not said much else. David had wondered that she wasn't screaming blue murder, but maybe she was just too overwhelmed to do so.

Jeb shoved. In her attempt to evade him she stumbled backwards and fell into the roadway. David leapt forward to scoop her out of the way of a fast moving wagon.

“Git yore hands offen my missus,” Jeb roared.

“She’s not your wife,” David retorted tightly, “and I would hazard a guess that she doesn’t wish to be, either.” He glanced down at the girl, now leaning against him, gasping with fright. “Do you?”

She shook her head, he could see tears shining in her eyes. He couldn’t blame her for looking scared, but her answer was angry and determined.

“I wouldn’t marry him if he put a knife to my throat.”

The words were a surprise. What did such a pretty girl know of a knife to the throat? She was tougher than she looked.

She righted herself and stepped away from him with a dignity David had to admire.

“She has to marry me! I paid her fare!”

Jeb directed his drunken glare at her, and David saw her cringe once more. Brave, but she was only a little bit of a thing, and she obviously knew she stood no chance against a belligerent drunk.

The door to the judge’s office opened and Judge Cy Bevan stepped out.

“What is all this commotion?”

Dressed in a dark suit and string tie, Bevan always looked the part. David had known him since he was a lad, Bevan was a friend of his father, but that didn’t mean the man looked on him with any amount of benevolence.

Bevan looked down his nose at them.

“Ferguson. Hmmp, no sooner are you back in town that you are causing trouble.”

David felt his temper flare, but squashed it firmly. That comment was unjustified, but it was no-one’s fault but his own that Judge Bevan should have a poor opinion of him. If it hadn’t been for the man’s long-time friendship with his father, David could have ended in the county jail after his past misdemeanors.

“This is none of my doing, Judge. I am trying to help this lady.”

“She’s my bride,” Jeb shouted. “Bought mail-order. I have the contract.” He groped inside his jacket and produced a crumple sheet of paper. “See here. She agreed.”

David had little doubt it was true, because he could see the despair and misery in those expressive eyes. The poor girl had traveled full of hope for the future, for a match with a man who had sent her flowery letters, only to find it had been a lie.

Judge Bevan took the paper from Jeb’s hand.

David voiced his opinion. “Maybe she did, but you told me, not half an hour since, that you got a girl from the cat house to compose the letters you sent her. It was none of your own words; you wooed her with pretty phrases, and it was all lies.”

“Is that true, Mr. Cornish?” Judge Bevan was still perusing the contract, but he didn’t miss a word.

“Wal, Irish Rose might have helped me a bit.”

“A lot, I’m bettin’. And did you tell her your job? Did you tell her about your home?” David questioned.

“A’course I did.”

“What did he tell you?” David turned his attention to the girl.

She lifted her chin and addressed the Judge directly, David could see she knew where her salvation might lie.

“He told me he ran a farm, with his father’s help. He said they had a small house, which was comfortable enough but it needed a woman’s touch.”

Judge Bevan exchanged a glance with David. They both knew that was, in essence, true, but it was a matter of degree.

“I believe you have misled this young woman,” Judge Bevan declared. “However, this document does state that she has agreed to marry you.”

“So his words about his home were a lie?”

“More of an embroidering of the truth,” David returned. “I have known Jeb Cornish for years, and they’ve never done much more than scrape a living. No doubt the shack does need a woman’s touch, but it’s one room. What married lady wants to share a sleeping space with her father-in-law?”

The poor girl looked horrified.

“I will not marry him. He lied. And he is *drunk*. What does that say about him?”

“I paid for you!” Jeb howled.

By this time an audience was gathering, Judge Bevan looked about.

“I believe you should come in to the office.”

“No!” Jeb’s young lady dug her toes in. “I am not going in there with you. I don’t want to marry him. How do I know that, once I am out of sight of these people, you won’t force me to do it? I won’t, I tell you!”

“Please,” David stepped forward, “I promise you I will not let that happen, but we need to discuss this in greater privacy.”

“What does it have to do with *you*?”

David had to admit, she did have a point. He could turn his back and walk away and no-one would think any the less of him. No-one but himself!

Maybe this girl had been sent here to test him? Sent to discover if he had truly changed his ways, if he now thought of others instead of only himself? The truth was there before him; his conscience would not allow him to walk away. He stepped closer and spoke so only she

could hear.

"You can repay the money he has spent, if necessary I will persuade him."

She raised her eyes to his and for the first time, met his gaze head on. "I can't, I do not have the funds." Her voice was as low as his. "I could get a job and work off what I owe him, possibly? Or you could lend me the money and I will work and pay you back?" She looked up at him, hope in her eyes.

For a few seconds David was transfixed. He had seen at first glance that she was a beauty, but those eyes! In that second he knew what was meant by 'cupid's arrow', because it struck him directly in the heart. He forced his brain to think, to frame an answer to her question.

"That is why we must go inside with the Judge." He knew his voice was husky, but maybe she would not notice how she had affected him. "We must work out a solution," he muttered, "and here on the street is not the place to do it." He offered her his arm. "Come."

She took it and accompanied him into the office.

CHAPTER THREE

Judge Bevan closed the door firmly behind them.

"Now, Miss…?"

"Baraquin," she supplied.

"Miss Baraquin, you came here to marry Mr. Cornish, and you have changed your mind."

"He is drunk. Do you think it is reasonable that I should marry a man who presents himself in such a fashion?"

The Judge cleared his throat. "Quite. Mr. Cornish, what is your explanation for this state of affairs?"

"I sent her fare, she said she would marry me!" Jeb returned belligerently.

"And what arrangements have you made for your new bride at your home?"

"Like what? We got a roof, what more can I do?"

"Did you explain the living arrangements in your letters?"

"I dunno," Jeb muttered.

"He led me to believe he had a nice small home and a farm." David watched her as she dug in her purse. "Here. Here is a letter. You tell me what *that* means."

The judge read the letter. David itched to know what it said. When Judge Bevan handed the page back to Miss Baraquin, he held out his hand.

"May I?"

Silently she handed it to him.

It was pretty much what she had said, and what Jeb had also admitted to earlier this morning. It was worded in a polite tone, with compliments and promises of a lovely life on their small farm, with a cozy home. Miss Baraquin hadn't seen the place, and she already doubted the veracity of the claim, when she saw the shack and the untidy piece of farm she would surely be appalled.

Judge Bevan was eyeing the couple with distaste.

"Miss Baraquin, since you no longer wish to go through with this contract, are you prepared to pay back the money you owe Mr. Cornish?"

"I… I will, but I need to find a job, to earn money so…"

"You have no funds?"

"No, Sir. But I can work, I will…"

"Just where do you think you can find work? What can you do?"

She lifted her chin and faced the Judge proudly.

"I will do what I am able, in the saloon or the dance hall if

necessary."

"Hmmp, I thought as much." Judge Bevan eyed the slightly dipped neckline of her dress.

David caught the flash of anger in her eyes, saw the despair follow a second later. It wasn't right; this girl was trying to better herself, and no-one was giving her a chance.

"How much?" The words were out of his mouth before he'd really considered consequences.

"Ninety five dollars for the contract and the ticket," Jeb returned. "I'll throw in the ring."

David gritted his teeth again. The contract and the travel cost what it cost, but a ring Jeb would just hand over? What sort of junk was it? This girl was too lovely to deserve a dollar ring!

He reached into his pocket and extracted a fistful of notes. One cursory glance was all he took before he thrust the money into Jeb's hand. It was more than Jeb had spent, maybe it would be enough to satisfy.

"Here, take this and get out. Go and improve your house, and your farm, then you can try again, maybe Irish Rose will accept you."

Jeb studied the money, realizing he'd made a profit.

"'Taint right," he growled, but he slapped his hand on the desk and headed for the door. He never even acknowledged his ex-bride-to-be as he stamped out, bumping into the door post as he did so.

The door slammed behind him and silence fell over the office.

"Now I owe *you* the money," Miss Baraquin murmured.

David stared at what Jeb had left on the desk. A ring. He stepped forward and picked it up. He had been right, it was a cheap trinket, but the second he held it in his hand the strangest feeling came over him.

"The money doesn't matter, you can marry me instead." He heard himself say it. He had no idea what he was thinking. He'd never *meant* to say it, but… why not? She was beautiful, and it was the right thing to do. Hadn't he been trying to do the right thing this last year or more?

He looked at her, she was staring, shocked that he should say such a thing, but she didn't look appalled. He knew he didn't look his best, he still needed that shave, but she didn't actually look as if it bothered her over-much.

"Well," Judge Bevan cleared his throat in an official manner, "that will certainly deal with the legal problems of this contract."

"Pardon?" Miss Baraquin turned her gaze to him.

"This contract requires that you marry. If Mr. Ferguson will step up, it will solve any potential problems."

"But you can't expect him to…"

David stepped to her side. “It’s all right. I am fine with this as long as you agree. If we find, down the line, that we don’t suit we can go our separate ways, and there is always divorce.”

“But…”

“I assure you, I am a better bet than Jeb Cornish. My family has a ranch outside of town, and my brother is the town Deputy Sheriff. What do you say?”

Abby stared at him, her head still spinning from recent events.

A better bet than Jeb Cornish. That wasn’t saying much. She knew absolutely nothing about this man, not his name, his age or his occupation, but thus far his behavior had been better than that of her supposed husband-to-be. He had suggested they could part if things didn’t work. This must be a risk worth taking, and she owed him for paying that money.

“All right.”

He turned to the Judge.

“Do it. We even have a ring, cheap trinket though it is.” He looked back at her. “I will get you another when we get the chance.”

Abby nodded, dumbly.

“Stand there, I will get the paperwork, and we need two witnesses.”

The Judge was all business now. He reached into his desk and extracted several papers, then he walked to the rear door and called his wife and housekeeper to be the witnesses.

Abby watched and did as she was told. It was like it was happening to another girl. She wasn’t unaware of the disapproving looks she was getting from both older women. They seemed affronted by everything about her. Maybe it was because she was a stranger, or maybe because they disapproved of mail-order brides, or maybe it was just her dress! The smarter woman, presumably the judge’s wife, had looked her up and down as if she was a nasty smell. It was true that their dresses were fastened up around their necks and very hot looking, while she did have a lower bodice, but it was nothing like as low as the dance hall girls all wore. Her dress was lighter weight and she wasn’t wearing many petticoats, but in Mississippi dresses like theirs would have caused a working girl to faint from the heat.

The questions were asked, the words were spoken. Mr. David Victor Ferguson, this was the man she was marrying. She glanced at the paperwork she was asked to sign, he was twenty six years of age. It was all very official and in no way romantic, but whatever else had she been expecting?

Formalities completed, her new husband thanked the ladies, and shook their hands. It was then she realized that Mrs. Judge Bevan was looking at *him* as if he was something the cat had brought in.

Maybe the distaste was aimed at her new husband, rather than herself?

It all seemed like a disturbing dream.

Thirty minutes after she had entered, she left the Judge's office on the arm of her new husband. Married, but not to the man she had anticipated.

She'd arrived here expecting to wed the writer of those lovely letters. Faced with an ill-tempered drunk, who had seemed to think she should be grateful for his attentions, she had been truly terrified when he had started pushing her around. It wasn't as if she'd never had to deal with such things, but she was painfully aware that she had signed a contract. The man *owned* her. He could rule her absolutely. She'd known that she didn't have the money to get out of the contract, even if she had been able to force Mr. Cornish to release her.

The presence of Mr. Ferguson had been… providential?

Had it been fate?

Had it been a good idea?

Had she had any choice at all?

The fact was, she had stepped off the stage and she had done what she had arrived here to do, she had married a stranger. She was Mrs. David Ferguson. For all she knew he could be a rogue, even an outlaw and trouble maker, just because he was tall, dark and handsome didn't mean he was noble.

Was she the world's biggest fool?

Truthfully, she had *already* been the world's biggest fool to believe in Mr. Cornish.

She may be a fool, but she wasn't a coward. She lifted her chin and stared straight at her new husband. The fact that he may be a scoundrel was beside the point, he had acted as her knight in shining armor.

"Thank you. I am grateful for your help. I have no idea why you saw fit to rescue me, I just hope that we don't both live to regret it."

CHAPTER FOUR

David regarded his new wife, walking quietly beside him. Until she spoke those words Miss Abigail Marie Baraquin, or rather Mrs. Abigail Ferguson, had seemed so stunned by all the events that she really hadn't said much at all, except 'I do'!

"I could not let a lady be treated in such a manner."

"But you didn't need to *marry* me."

"You agreed, so I did, that is all there is to say." David was still wondering at himself. Getting married was something he'd never considered since Charis had chosen his brother Ben. But here he was, a married man.

"Oh. Oh no,"

"What is the matter?"

"My earring, it's gone." A tear trickled down her cheek and she dashed it away.

"Was it valuable?" David frowned at the other offending earring, he wouldn't know a valuable piece of jewelry if he saw it, but that particular bauble looked too large to be anything more than glass.

"Only to me," she admitted. "They were my mother's, a little gift to remember her. We were not a family who could afford expensive trinkets, but I loved these because they were hers." She touched the remaining earring sadly.

"Then we will find it." He took her arm and led her back along the road. "I suspect it is where you fell."

As they walked he wondered at himself. Before he had left this town, so many months ago, he would have jeered at the idea of hunting for a lost trinket. He would have been exasperated by a woman making a fuss over such a triviality. But here he was, being pleasant about it. He glanced down at her, walking at his side and was struck again by her beauty.

The woman had bewitched him. There was no other explanation for this, she had cast a spell on him.

As they reached the Judge's office once again he caught the glint of something in the dust.

"Here it is." He bent and retrieved the trinket. "Ahh, I'm afraid…" He held it in his palm to show her. "I'm sorry, it is ruined."

The metal was twisted and the pale glass gem was gone, shattered into the dust of the street.

"Oh." Abby received the earing sadly. "I suppose a horse must have trodden on it." She clutched it in her hand for a second before raising her chin to look him in the eye. "No matter, I will still treasure

the one I have left."

Glass jewelry, a dollar wedding ring. This girl had not had it good, yet.

He couldn't help but admire her fortitude. She had controlled her tears; she was putting a brave face on what must have been a very trying day. Marrying a different man to the one you had come to meet could not have been easy, but she was doing an admirable job of remaining calm. His mind strayed to his brother's wife, the lovely Maybelle whom they would be meeting before this day was through. She would have thrown a fit by this time, Maybelle was always one for the dramatics.

Thinking of Maybelle returned him to the problem now before them, getting to the ranch. He supposed they could hire a pony, or a buggy, but it was all money, and he had just spent a large wedge of what he had in his pocket. He was not a poor man, not now, but he was prudent enough to have his finances under control, and his money in the bank. That was all well and good, until you needed the dollars in your hand!

"How much luggage do you have?"

"A carpet bag and a small trunk." She glanced about, suddenly looking panicked. "What if they have been taken? I left them at the stage stop, he never gave me chance to…"

"Don't you worry. There were plenty of good people watching that exhibition, your luggage will have been taken care of."

"Not stolen?"

"No, I suspect it will be in the stage office." He only hoped that was true. "Could you manage with just the carpet bag for a day or so?"

She considered for a second. "I have been using just my carpet bag while I traveled, I think I can do that."

"Good, I will return to town to collect your trunk in a day or so, but now we will head for my family home on my horse."

"On your horse? *Both* of us on your horse?"

"Yup."

"But… isn't that a bit much for your poor horse?"

"Believe me, Trooper is strong enough to carry the added burden of a little bit of a thing like you. I've often carried calves on his back, I doubt you weigh much more."

She looked taken aback, then indignant. David didn't think he'd ever seen such expressive eyes. She blinked a few times before replying.

"All right, but…" she paused. "All right. When do we leave?"

"Immediately. It's around seven miles, with two up it will take the best part of an hour to get there, we need to get there, soonish. Let's

collect the carpet bag."

The luggage was in the stage coach office, as David had predicted. It was the work of just a few moments to secure the carpet bag to the saddle.

David climbed aboard.

"How do I…?"

"Stand on the sidewalk," he instructed. He pushed Trooper close, as a well-trained cow horse, he moved exactly as he was asked. David leaned over and wrapped his arm around her waist and hoisted her onto his lap. She gave a little squeak of reaction, nothing more.

It took a few seconds to sort her skirt, but, as he'd already discovered when he had picked her out of the roadway, she didn't have any ironmongery to speak of beneath the skirts.

"Comfortable?"

She wriggled her bottom to settle herself. David instantly felt warm, she felt rather nice on his lap. He squashed such inappropriate thoughts, there would be time for that later, he hoped, now they had to ride to the ranch.

"Yes, I am fine."

"Good, let's go."

As they rode through the town, David was not unaware of the attention they received. It was not at all what he had planned, the quiet return had turned into a fiasco. Presumably everyone in town who had ever known him would soon hear of today's events, and would be pointing fingers once again.

On the outskirts of the town they reached the small church. It was a weekday and the place was deserted.

"Please, could we stop for a moment?"

"There is a problem?"

"No, but.., I would like to go into the church for a few minutes, if that is all right with you?"

David had not expected that. She'd seemed happy enough to be married by the judge, she'd made no mention of a preacher, but now she wanted to visit the church? She'd not seemed like a preachy sort of girl, but who was to say?

He turned Trooper towards the church and pulled up by the door.

"It may not be open."

"If it is not, I will stand by the doorway for a few moments."

He allowed her to slip to the floor and she mounted the steps, the door opened beneath her hand and she stepped inside. He felt compelled to follow.

When he entered, she had walked up to the front of the church, and was standing before the altar. He looked around; this was the church he had known since his childhood. Indeed, it was the only

church he had ever entered. Since he had ridden away, two years ago, he had not been near to a church. He had not turned from God, but he certainly didn't live a life of piety. If she was deeply religious, would this become an issue in this impetuous marriage?

He joined her at the altar. She had her head bowed and her eyes closed, but she lifted her head to gaze at him. She was very solemn.

"You are… a regular… church goer?" he questioned softly.

He saw her lips tighten as she considered her answer.

"No. I have to admit I have not been to church since I was a child. I believe; I read my bible, but circumstances have never allowed…" she tailed off into a shamed silence.

She was no different to him.

"I am the same," he admitted. "When I was here I came to church with the family, when I left it never happened."

"So will we come here? To this church?"

"Yes, if it will make you happy. I would never force you, but the family will come, and I will be with them."

"Thank you. I think I would like that." She stood for a few more seconds, looking up at the altar. "I suppose we should go to… your home."

"I think we should." He took her arm and steered her back to his horse.

Once aboard again they headed out of town on the trail to the Ferguson ranch.

"Tell me about your home."

"We are heading to the ranch where I was born, it was built by my father Zac, he is still in charge. I am one of eight children, three of the boys are still running the ranch with Pa."

"You have sisters?"

"One, she has married and moved away."

"And your mother?"

"Died more than ten years back."

"So there are no women on the ranch?"

"Josh's wife Maybelle lives there, and Ben's wife Charis lives a nearby. Ben doesn't work on the ranch all of the time, he is the town deputy."

"And you run the ranch with them?"

"Ahh, no. I used to but I have been away for well over a year."

He could almost feel the wheels turning in her head. "So what were you doing while you were away, and are you back to work on the ranch? If so, how do I fit in? Where will we live?"

"Well… that remains to be seen. I've not actually been back to the ranch yet. I arrived in Jessop Creek just this morning."

She looked up at him, a worried look on her face. "They are not

expecting you?"

"No, they are not."

"So they will be expecting *me* even less!"

"That is true."

"Where would you have slept had you arrived home alone?"

He looked down at her, somewhat puzzled by the question. "In the bunk house."

"And since I *am* here?"

"I… err, well, I don't know, yet, but there is a spare room, expect we can use that."

"You really think we can?"

"I am hoping that is true."

She lapsed into silence.

David pondered her words, knowing she had a good point. Hopefully they would be accepted at the ranch, if they were not, they would have to return to town and take a room in the hotel until they could sort something out.

He looked down at her on his lap. Now must be the time to learn a bit more about this young lady.

"Have you traveled far?"

"Today, just from Laramie. But I have traveled many miles, for many days. I have come from Natchez, in Mississippi. It is on the river, north of Baton Rouge."

David had never ventured to Mississippi, but he had been to Texas, and that was a very long way. No wonder she was looking a bit travel stained.

"How did you get in contact with Jeb Cornish?"

"Through a mail-order agency which was based in St. Louis. I never went there, I just wrote a letter, as did he, and we were matched up. We exchanged several letters. You saw one of them."

"Hmm, I suppose it wasn't a bad idea, had Cornish told the truth. But if he'd told the truth, no-one would have accepted him." He looked down at her. "Why did you choose the mail-order route? Surely there are men available in Natchez, or Baton Rouge come to that?"

"Plantation owners and riverboat men. And since the war, well it's not easy. I didn't want to marry a riverboat man, my mother did, and look where that got her! Widowed before she was barely twenty-five. As for the plantation owners, I was not half posh enough for one of them."

"There must have been…"

"Not that I ever discovered."

Her answer was so final that he left the question still hanging.

"So what work did your mother do? And you too, because I am

assuming that you were hardly a lady of leisure." He had held her hand when they had taken their vows. Her hands were small and delicate, but they were work roughened, no soft, ladylike skin. This girl had known hard work.

"My mother… sold things; I cleaned."

Again, the reply was short and gave away little information. He did wonder if she had some secret, but it was most likely that she was ashamed of her straitened circumstances. He didn't push her.

"I am not going to promise that there won't be cleaning in your future, but it will likely be housework, which I imagine is on a smaller scale."

She gave him a rather distracted small smile, as if she didn't know how to answer. When she did speak, she changed the subject.

"I have never lived anywhere with hills, or anywhere that you can see the mountains. I have seen all sorts on this journey. I was used to flat swamps and lots of trees, although the river banks could be high in places."

"And I have never seen the Mississippi, while you lived alongside it. We have many things from our past which can be discussed." He pointed at mountain ranges. "Over there lie the Medicine Bow mountains. Beautiful, but harsh in winter."

"Does it get very cold here?"

"Yes. In the winter there will be snow, it will lie deeply in the valleys. The family will bring the cattle closer to the ranch house for the winter, away from the higher peaks. And away from the wolves."

"Wolves?"

"And bears, and coyotes, and rattlesnakes in the summer."

"No alligators?"

"No, no alligators," he returned with a chuckle. He tried again with the family questions. "Your father was a boatman?"

"He was a French Creole river-man, he sailed up stream with cargo. Then the war came and he continued on the riverboats. I was only a child, I never knew exactly what he was doing, but one day he left and never came back. The steamer sank, it hit a shoal, somehow. We never really knew what happened, but it was miles from home. It was weeks before we knew he would never come back. I was eight."

"I am sorry to hear that." She was more forthcoming about father than mother, but maybe that was to be expected. Despite the fact he was many years dead, he had plied an honest trade and then presumably fought for his people; she felt no shame concerning her father. "Is your mother still alive?"

"She is."

This confirmed his impression that her mother's lot in life was not something to boast about. No matter, he had married the daughter,

not the mother.

Married.

He still couldn't quite believe exactly what he had done!

A few moments later the ranch buildings came into view ahead of them, and David's thoughts turned to the reception they might receive.

CHAPTER FIVE

They rode into the yard and up to the house porch. An elderly looking dog trotted out of his dog house. He regarded them for a few seconds, barked twice and lay down next to the front porch, having done his duty.

Abby wondered if that was his normal style, or did he recognize David as friend rather than foe?

The door opened and two women stepped out onto the porch.

"David!" The red-head exclaimed. "Well, here is a surprise."

"Hmmp. You need a shave," the second woman stated.

It was hardly a promising greeting, and Abby felt her heart sink. Was her husband's arrival honestly that unwelcomed by his family? And if he wasn't welcomed, what chance was there for her?

"Maybelle," the red-head censured her companion. "Maybe he does, but that is hardly the way to greet your brother."

"By marriage," Maybelle returned sharply.

"No matter." The red-head descended the steps. "David, it is good to see you after so many months."

"Did you miss me?" David's voice struck Abby as brittle. He'd not even used such a tone with Jeb Cornish, earlier today. She couldn't help but wonder at his position here on the ranch. He said he had left, had it been under some sort of cloud?

"Don't be like that! Of course we have wondered what you were doing. Your father has mentioned you a number of times."

"No doubt he was wondering what sort of trouble I had gotten into. Well, I didn't, and I've come home to offer my assistance with running the ranch."

"That's nice," she returned. "And who is your companion?"

David's arm tightened around her. "Abby, this is Charis Ferguson, wife to my brother Ben, and Maybelle Ferguson, wife to my brother Josh. Ladies, this is Mrs. Abigail Ferguson, my wife."

"What?" Maybelle's squawk was piercing.

David moved and lowered her to the ground, and for a few seconds Abby was tasked with sorting her skirts into something resembling respectability. By the time she was sorted out, Charis Ferguson had overcome her surprise.

"Well, that *is* a surprise. It's nice to meet you, Abigail." She held out her hand to Abby and shook firmly.

"You too," Abby returned, unsure of what else to say.

David lowered the carpet bag and Charis caught it.

"I need to speak with father, where can I find him?"

"Out on the west pasture," Maybelle returned immediately.

"I will find him. Maybe you could organize a bath for my wife?"

With that, David rode out, leaving them to get acquainted without him.

Abby stared at his retreating horse. How was this ever going to work? She knew nothing about the affairs here, and he just left her, abandoned with two women about whom she knew nothing.

She studied them, if she was not mistaken the dark haired girl, Maybelle, was pregnant. She was slim and elegant, but she had just the slightest bulge in her belly, and she stood with her hand on that bulge, as if to emphasize the fact. She seemed disposed to be particularly unwelcoming.

"You are David's *wife*? A tall tale if ever I heard one. What's he after this time? What scheme is he cooking up to take something which is not his?"

"Maybelle, that is very unfair of you. We have no idea what David has been doing since he left," Charis censured. "If he has married, he has obviously been living a better life."

"You think?" Maybelle turned on her again. "Are you pregnant? Did your Pa force him at the end of a shotgun?"

"No!" Abby prepared to defend herself, and her new husband too if it should be necessary. "Mr. Ferguson was, is, good to me. He helped me from a very difficult situation."

"For his own reasons, I have no doubt!" Maybelle retorted. "Since when did David help anyone without an ulterior motive?"

Abby gritted her teeth and raised her chin, this woman was probably seven or eight years her senior, and held a privileged position in this family, but she would not be cowed by her. Obviously Maybelle Ferguson disliked her brother-in-law, but he was Abby's husband, and she would not hear him maligned in such a manner when there was no cause.

"Obviously I have no knowledge of past situations, but I can assure you Mr. Ferguson, my husband, stepped up to rescue me from a… a… fate possibly worse than death! The man I had agreed to marry was nothing like his letter promised. I understand Mr. Ferguson knew him, and knew he had lied."

"So who were you supposed to marry?"

"Mr. Jebediah Cornish."

"Jeb Cornish? Oh, my stars, how did you ever walk in to that one?"

"I… he…" Abby stumbled on the words. But the truth would out. "I came as a mail-order bride, and all the letters he had sent me had been written by… a woman, not by Mr. Cornish."

Maybelle burst out laughing. "You are someone's mail-order bride,

and David took you on instead? Oh that is priceless!" She continued to laugh.

Charis eyed her with a frown. "So Jeb Cornish sent letters composed by a woman?"

"One of the dance hall whores I imagine," Maybelle sniggered again.

Abby had no answer; it was true. What dismayed her more than hilarity at Jeb Cornish's actions, was Maybelle's scathing dismissal of dance hall whores. What would they say if the discovered her mother's station in life?

"I will not hear criticism of Mr. Ferguson for rescuing me. I am very grateful."

"I'll bet you are. But realize this, David has no position here at the ranch, not since he left to find something better."

"That is not fair, Maybelle. David left to better himself, that is not the same thing," Charis reproved.

"Maybe he did, but he is still no more than one of the younger sons. The ranch is not his to control, never will be."

"David went away to find a different way forward in his life," Charis returned sharply. "And he has done exactly that. He now has a wife, and he will be looking to a future befitting a married man. We should appreciate that he has come home to inform us of what he is doing."

"Or what he wants done for him!" Maybelle's words were close to a jeer.

Abby felt her heart plummet to her boots. She wanted to argue with the woman, but how could she? Her knowledge of the man she had married was non-existent, maybe Maybelle Ferguson was right in her accusations. Just because David had rescued her from Jeb Cornish did not mean he had some wonderful future lined-up for her to share. All she could do was defend his actions of today.

"I assure you, David acted in a truly gallant manner when he stepped up to rescue me this morning."

"This morning. Only this morning? Oh my, this is even better than I thought." Maybelle laughed once again.

Charis laid a hand on Abby's arm. "Ignore her, she is being silly, and very inconsiderate. Come inside and we will have a nice drink." She bent and picked up the carpet bag and urged Abby into the house.

A few moments later Abby was seated at the table, Charis pulled out a chair to sit beside her.

"Maybelle, do something useful and pour coffee."

"This is my kitchen, don't order me about," Maybelle snapped.

"Since it is your kitchen, I presumed you would be the one pouring the coffee," Charis returned, "I wouldn't wish to tread on your

toes." Abby was fairly sure she caught a sarcastic note in her words.

Maybelle stepped to the stove and made a great production of sorting the cups and pouring the coffee. Charis caught Abby's gaze and raised her eyebrows, adding a small shrug to the gesture. Obviously she found the woman trying, despite the fact they were family.

"Now, tell me Abby, have you traveled far? I deduce from your dress that you are probably used to a warmer climate than we have here."

"Yes, I have come from Natchez, on the Mississippi."

"Very different from Jessop Creek, Wyoming," Charis returned with feeling. "Have you ever seen snow? There will be plenty of it in just a few weeks. I hope you have some warm clothes with you." She glanced at the carpet bag, which obviously didn't contain anything particularly bulky.

"I must admit, I am not well prepared for cold weather. I was hoping someone would advise me."

"And buy your winter clothes?" Maybelle plonked the coffee before her.

Abby couldn't contain a tart reply. "I thought it silly to purchase things which might not be suitable." She had no money to spare for such purchases, but she wasn't admitting that to Maybelle.

"As your husband, no doubt David will be glad to get you some winter clothes," Charis assured her. "Certainly, we can give you a good idea of what you will need."

"Thank you." Abby drank her coffee. There was so much she wanted to know, but she had no idea if these women were the ones to ask. "Do you both live here?"

"Maybelle does, with Josh. Ben and I live a couple of miles away in what was my parents homestead. In fact, I really should be getting home, I need to finish Ben's supper." She drained her coffee. "It was nice to meet you, no doubt we will see each other again soon. If you feel like visiting I am home most days if I am not here." She stood up. "Thank you for the coffee, Maybelle. I will see you tomorrow, most likely."

"Bye." That was the only response Charis got from Maybelle, who was back in the fireside chair with her embroidery.

Charis smiled at Abby as she went out of the door, and she was left sitting at the table feeling very alone. She glanced around, wondering how long it would be before David returned. He had said something about organizing a bath for her, but only Charis had made her welcomed, and she could hardly offer a bath, or even facilities to freshen up, in a house which was not her home. Maybelle had either considered it an imposition, or had just not heard David's request.

For several long moments neither spoke, eventually Abby realized she would have to be the one to break the silence. If this was where she had to stay she had better try to make herself useful.

"Is there somewhere I could freshen up a little, and then I will help you with the supper preparation."

Maybelle looked up at her. "David said you needed a bath."

"I most likely do, but I wouldn't want to put you out."

Maybelle set aside her sewing with a sigh. "I can't heat all that water at this time of day, I cannot lift it in *my* condition."

"I could lift it," Abby suggested. "I do not expect anyone to wait on me, but I do need you to show me where things are, and allow me to help myself, and you."

"I suppose. Can you just wash for now?"

"That would be nice thank you, if there is some hot water?"

"On the stove."

Trying to get anything out of her was like pulling teeth. Abby didn't expect anyone to open up to her in the first moments, but Maybelle was making no effort at all. Did this mean she disliked David? Certainly, she'd not had a good word to say about him. Charis had been less critical but Maybelle had seemed resentful, irritated that he had returned, and therefore irritated with her too!

She moved to the stove to lift the kettle of water. "Where would you like me to wash?"

"Come this way."

Maybelle led her to a small wash room, which contained a bath, a large copper and a wash basin "We only have cold water unless the copper is lit. Towels on the shelf." She turned and left Abby to it.

Abby looked around, this was not all she needed. She set the kettle on the sink and returned to the fireside.

"Pardon me, Maybelle, but I need to use the facilities first."

"Outside across the yard. You can't miss it."

Abby used the outhouse and returned to the house, collecting her bag as she passed through the kitchen and headed to the wash room. Maybelle virtually ignored her. She took her time in the wash room, what was the point in hurrying when the woman had no desire to talk with her?

Abby shot the bolt on the door and stripped off completely, if she couldn't bathe properly she would at least have a good wash. It was hardly warm in the wash room, so she scrubbed swiftly before toweling down and replacing her underwear with her only other set. At least that felt clean. She pulled her better dress from the bag, it wasn't any warmer than the one she had taken off, but it wasn't streaked with soot and dirt from her travels. Finally feeling more respectable, she returned to the kitchen.

“You took your time.”

“I was in great need of a wash, I have been traveling for days.” Abby knew her tone was short, but where was the point in being polite when Maybelle didn’t respond? “Now, is there anything I can do to help you?” It grated to offer when the woman was so ungracious but, needs must.

“You can make the biscuits for supper.”

“Certainly, where do I find everything I need, and how many am I cooking for?”

Maybelle directed her to the flour barrel before retreating to her seat once again.

“Maybelle, do you feel ill?” It had just occurred to Abby that the woman was expecting, and she knew that some women found that time very trying.

Maybelle regarded her resentfully. “I feel sick *all* of the time. The doctor told me it would pass, but it hasn’t. Cooking makes me feel ill. I can eat, but the cooking is horrible.”

Abby nodded. “Obviously I cannot know how you feel, but I have known ladies who really struggled for the first months. I believe it will get better, but that doesn’t help at the moment, does it?”

“No.”

“I will complete the supper. How many am I cooking for?”

Maybelle stared at her. “No ‘you’ve got to put up with it’? That’s what Charis says.”

Abby gave a small laugh. “When she is in the same position, you will be able to remind her of that fact.”

“I will, believe me. There will be seven for supper, including you and David.”

Abby checked the stew which was on the stove and set about making biscuits.

CHAPTER SIX

David wasn't exactly proud of abandoning her, but possibly she could explain this better than he could. Certainly, he barely knew where to start.

The first thing he had to do was inform his father, because there was no possibility of sleeping the bunk house tonight!

Hopefully he could move into the spare room with… Abby.

Ridiculous, he had to think to remember her given name. This whole situation was laughable, but what else could he have done? Maybe he'd been headed down a dark road in his past, but he'd left that all behind, and leaving an innocent young woman to the tender mercies of someone like Jeb Cornish, particularly a *drunk* Jeb Cornish, was not the action of a good man. When he had scooped her from the road, he had known, somehow, that she was meant to be his.

David mused as he rode. He had left here to try to make something of himself. He had finally realized why he had often behaved badly while at home. He had never felt that anyone *saw* him unless he made a scene, because he wasn't the one they looked to for anything. Abraham, the firstborn, was the true cattleman, he took after their father Zac, and he had an instinct for the animals. Josh, one of the elder twins and Maybelle's husband, was a brilliant horseman. Ben, the other twin, had made his mark as town deputy, while the younger twins, Ruth and Caleb, had moved on to another small ranch, jointly owned by Ruth's husband and Caleb. Adam, the second son, had also moved away to marry, he had always excelled in hunting, being a phenomenal shot. That left only young Joe, who at twenty had yet to make his mark. He, David, had never excelled at anything except his school work, and his father hadn't considered that to be relevant on a ranch.

His time away had made him see that his talents lay in the organization, and he had come home with the idea of helping his father with the book work and the planning of the future of the ranch. Progress lay in importing better cattle, in more efficient breeding. He knew someone who could provide him with a bull and a few cows, indeed he had made enquiries, and if his father approved, they would be on their way very soon. He could be useful.

But now, before he had even set foot across the threshold, he would present his father with another problem. His father's reaction to another daughter-in-law, another mouth to feed, was unpredictable. He hoped he wouldn't have to ride away with Abby before they even had a chance to get acquainted.

He spied riders in the distance; they were accompanying several head of cattle in the direction of the ranch house. As he got closer he could pick out his father and two of his brothers, Josh and Joe he believed.

He rode on, rehearsing how he would approach this meeting.

Zac pulled up his horse and waited for his son to join him.

"David. Well, there is a surprise. I was wondering if we were likely to see you again." Zac Ferguson didn't mince his words.

"I wrote," David returned shortly.

"Twice, in two years!"

"I was busy."

"Doing what?"

"Learning the cattle business, about importing different breeds and improving the stock."

Zac nodded. "That makes sense, you always were the clever one."

David almost reeled at the compliment, his father was never free with praise of any sort.

"Thank you, Pa. I believe I have found a way to use my… brains, a way that can help the ranch."

"And you are thinking to stay?"

David took a breath. Here came the difficult bit!

"For a while, at least. But I'm afraid the bunk house will not suffice, because I have my wife with me."

"Your *wife*?"

"Yes, Pa, my wife."

Unfortunately Josh pulled up beside them just in time to hear these words.

"Your wife? What woman was fool enough to marry you?"

David turned his gaze to his brother, if those words had been meant as a joke, it wouldn't have been so bad, but he knew it was not. He felt his anger flare, but he squashed the feeling; it would do no good displaying how he felt. Josh had always been the brother who jeered and tormented him, he knew he'd not taken it well as a boy. He had, in his turn, tormented poor Joe, his youngest brother. As they had grown, the animosity between him and Josh had never really died. He'd always found it hard to believe that Josh and Ben, the elder twins, could look so alike but be so different in character. Ben was fair minded and level headed, Josh was volatile. If anyone was going to question his marriage, it would be Josh.

"I have a wife," he returned evenly, "whether she was foolish to marry me remains to be seen, she is the only one who can judge."

"Josh, get back to those cattle if you don't have anything better to say," Zac growled.

Josh knew better than to argue with that tone, he turned and rode

away.

David returned his attention to his father, and tried to ignore the annoyance Josh had stirred.

"I am sorry if it is difficult, but we will need to use the other bedroom."

"Hmmp." Zac glanced back at Josh, who had now reached the cattle once more. "Congratulations to you, I hope you will be happy. I'm glad to hear you have straightened up a bit."

The second part of that speech was hardly complimentary, but he could take it from his father, and at least he seemed to approve of the marriage.

"I have been working hard to make my way in the cattle business. As for my marriage, only time will tell, but I must tell you, I hadn't actually planned it. My bride, Abigail, was stuck in a very nasty situation, and the only realistic way out was to marry her."

"Is she in the family way?"

Zac was instantly suspicious. It made David angry, but he knew it was no more than many would believe.

"No. I only met her this morning; she arrived as a mail-order bride for Jeb Cornish. Cornish was drunk and abusive, demanding his rights or his money back. She's a lovely, innocent young woman, I couldn't turn my back."

"So you *married* her?"

"I did."

"Hmmp. Sounds a bit chancy to me, but it's your life."

"A mail-order arrangement would always be chancy. Marrying her was not going to stand in the way of any other relationship, I have no-one else."

"You wanted to marry?"

David shrugged. "I'd not given it much thought. I certainly am not like Abe, and against the idea of marriage, but… this is just a bit sooner than I had expected."

"Well, I hope it turns out well." Zac looked over to Josh once again, the cattle were now moving in the direction of the ranch. "As to sleeping arrangements, you can stay in the extra room tonight. Tomorrow I think I will vacate the loft room, and you can go up there. It's a bit more private, and I am finding that ladder hard on my old knees."

David stared at him in disbelief, to hear his father admit to a failing body was not at all normal.

"You are sure? Will you be all right in the spare room?"

"Nope, I shall go to the bunk house. I will be honest, son, and I've not said this to any of the others, so do not repeat it, lately I find Josh's lady-wife a bit of a termagant. I know I shouldn't criticize

because she is in the family way and it's making her bad tempered, but the peace and quiet of the bunkhouse will be a relief." He nodded at David. "As to the second room, when the child arrives, no doubt she will want the space, so I may as well move out now. I assume you will not be staying long-term?"

In truth David hadn't thought much beyond tonight!

"Long-term we will need a place of our own," he confirmed. As to where that might be, as yet he had no clue.

"Until you make some decision about that, you may stay on the house loft room. Are you gonna help get these cattle home?"

"Sure thing."

David pushed Trooper towards the cattle and helped shepherd them back to the ranch.

An hour later he put Trooper in the barn and headed into the house to discover how Abby was faring with the women folk.

His father seemed pleased his son had returned, and he wasn't obstructive about the marriage either. Josh had been skeptical, but both Abe and Joe had greeted him in a friendly fashion. The news of his marriage was accepted with a solemn nod from Abe, and exclamations of surprise from Joe. All in all, no-one had yet thrown any real barbs in his direction. If anyone was to be put out by his return, it should be Joe, David was well aware he had not treated his youngest brother well during their teenaged years.

Things changed, he would not behave in such a manner any more, but he could still see that it would take while for him to be truly accepted back into the fold.

He mounted the steps into the kitchen behind Abe, wondering what awaited him on the other side. He had ridden away and left Abby, it hadn't been a fair thing to do, now he felt guilty.

What awaited them in the kitchen was not what he might have expected. Maybelle was seated by the fire, still sewing, while Abby was standing at the stove, seeing to the evening meal. A tray of delicious looking biscuits sat on the back of the stove, keeping warm.

Abe stopped to survey the scene, David almost bumped into him, wondering at his reaction to Abigail.

"Well," Abe muttered to him. "I must congratulate you again, a pretty girl, and a cook to boot." He strode over to the stove. "Good evening to you, ma'am. I am Abraham, I am very pleased to meet you. I see you have already settled in."

Abby smiled up at him, and David was instantly jealous, a reaction which took him by surprise.

“I thought, since I have arrived unannounced, I should make myself useful.” She held her hand out to Abe, and to David’s amazement Abe did not offer to shake, instead he lifted her small hand and lowered his head to drop a kiss on her fingers.

“And we are all grateful for your contribution.”

She blushed, and David felt something roar to life, a feeling he had never experienced before. Possessiveness. She should not be looking at his brother in that manner, *he* was the one she owed all her smiles. He clenched his teeth and controlled his temper. He had sworn he would never again allow that temper to boil over while in this house.

He moved to her side, he should make some show of introducing her to his family, even though standing beside her had suddenly made him feel very warm. He was pretty certain he too was blushing beneath his three day old whiskers. The last thing he needed was for his brothers, and most of all Josh, to realize.

Abby looked up at him. “Is everything all right?”

He caught the worried tone, and gave a small nod. “Yes, we can sleep in the second room for tonight. Tomorrow we will have a different arrangement.”

“Oh. I see.”

She still sounded worried, and David was well aware that she didn’t see, but he couldn’t explain now. Everyone had piled into the kitchen and had taken their seats at the table. Now they were waiting expectantly, both for their supper, and for an explanation.

“Hello, everyone. It is good to be back. May I introduce to you my new wife, Abigail. Before anyone can begin to speculate about this, I will tell you how this happened. Abigail arrived in Jessop Creek to marry Jeb Cornish. He had lied to her about his circumstances, and he was drunk when he met her. Abby realized she had made a mistake, but the contract she had signed was a legal document. I bought the contract from Cornish, and Abby is now Mrs. Ferguson. I know this may seem unconventional, but mail-order marriages are becoming commonplace. I hope you will wish us well.”

There was a few seconds of silence before Zac rose to his feet.

“Welcome to our family, Mrs. Ferguson.”

Abby, who was still standing by the stove, spoon in hand, blushed once again. “Thank you. I hope I will get the chance to get to know you all over the next few days.”

“I am Zacchary, since you are now my daughter-in-law you may call me Pa if you so wish. This is Abraham, Joshua and Joseph. Obviously you have met Maybelle, Mrs. Josh Ferguson. There is also Benjamin and his wife Charis, who live nearby, Adam and his wife Betsy, who live in Freestone, and Caleb and his twin sister Ruth who

live near Laramie with Ruth's husband."

Abby looked a little bemused by all this, but she still spoke up. "I am pleased to meet you all, I met Charis when I first arrived."

"Good," Zac stated shortly. "Now, we need to eat."

The table was set and everyone, including Maybelle had taken their seats, leaving only himself and Abby standing. It was ridiculous, because they were the newcomers, the guests almost. Abby would have no clue how mealtimes were conducted, but he could remember his mother putting the stew pan in the center of table, so he lifted the pan from the stove and placed it onto the wooden platter on the table.

"Thank you," Abby murmured. "I wasn't sure…"

"How could you be? Just slip the biscuits onto a plate and put them there for everyone. Is there butter?"

"Oh, yes, I must get it."

"No, I will."

She turned to get the biscuits, David moved and collected the butter before he took his seat. Finally Abby was able to sit at the table, looking somewhat overheated and rather flustered. Zac said grace, and everyone attacked their supper with enthusiasm.

David served his portion of stew and took a biscuit without really noticing, he was seething at the behavior of Maybelle. Maybe Abby had offered to help, but Maybelle, in her normal fashion, had just left her to deal with serving the supper, as if she was a servant.

"These are the best biscuits I've had in months," Joe observed from the seat to his left. David glanced at him in time to see Abe, who was seated to Joe's left, dig him sharply in the arm. Joe rolled his eyes and dropped his gaze back to the plate, catching David's questioning look as he did so. He turned his head and murmured. "Mustn't upset Maybelle. She usually burns the tops, and they are dry. I'll bet your little lady made these."

David looked at the biscuit he had been eating without much thought, and took another bite. Joe was right, it was good, soft and moist, exactly right. He looked at Abby, now eating the rather tasteless stew, and wondered how it would be if she had cooked that too? Most likely better than this! It would appear Abe had been right, the girl could cook.

In a very few moments plates were cleared and everyone was sitting back awaiting coffee. There was stew left in the pot, but not one biscuit to be seen.

"There are no biscuits left for breakfast," Maybelle observed. "You didn't make enough!"

David almost retaliated. However many Abby had made, they would most likely have vanished just as fast.

"I will have to make some more," his wife returned evenly. "What

time is breakfast? I will make sure to be up in good time."

Zac was watching her from across the table. "You'll do, girl. Now where is the coffee?"

To David's surprise, Abe stood and moved to collect the coffee pot as Abby rose to her feet once again.

"It's heavy, sister, and hot. You get the cups."

Abby placed the cups on the table, and began to collect the dirty plates into the sink. David glanced at Maybelle, who hadn't moved a muscle to help, and was engrossed in conversation with her husband, before he too rose and collected the remaining plates. He moved to Abby's side, where she was scraping the plates into a bucket.

"Thank you for… I was going to say helping Maybelle, but she's done nothing."

Abby looked up at him. "To be fair, she had done the stew before I arrived, and I think she finds cooking difficult in her condition. The smells make her feel ill."

"But she could clear the table."

Abby gave a small shrug. "No matter."

Once the plates were in the sink, David steered her back to the table. "Come on, drink your coffee before you tackle that pile of crocks."

She sat down, David was well aware that she was both weary and rather overwhelmed. She didn't have much to say when Abe and Joe plied him with questions about his travels. She rose to do the dishes, and when she did so, Maybelle pleaded weary and took herself, and Josh, to bed. As a result, both he and Joe helped her with the washing up, while Zac and Abe sat by the fire talking quietly.

As soon as the chores were finished David excused them both to the empty bedroom, the sooner she got some sleep the better.

It felt very strange to be looking out for someone other than himself. He had tried so hard to change the way he behaved in this life, but he wasn't certain that this wasn't a step too far.

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the end of her first week on the ranch Abby wasn't exactly having second thoughts, but she hardly felt settled. She seemed to have been accepted fairly well, indeed Zac Ferguson had vacated his room in the loft to accommodate them. Everyone seemed happy, with the exception of Maybelle. She wasn't quite certain what the woman's gripe could be, but she had done her utmost to help around the house.

Family acceptance aside, she was finding that she had certainly not seen all sides of this man the day she married him! Since that first evening, when he had helped her clear up after supper, they had not interacted much when in company. With his family he was intent on making himself heard, constantly, and he never seemed to bother with her at all. In private he was different, hardly the most loving and attentive of husbands, but he wasn't anything like as boorish as he appeared when he was with his brothers.

Along with that problem was the impression she got when Charis was present. The girl was friendly enough, and Abby had no axe to grind with her personally, but she was fairly certain her husband was more than a little enamored of his sister-in-law. It was not a pleasant feeling. She could have been making something of nothing, but the idea lingered in her head.

When David came to their bed at night he was harsh, brittle even. It took him some time to relax. She made a point of talking to him, because she wanted to know him, but if she didn't initiate the talk, he never bothered. He never told her to be quiet, but at for the first minutes she was pretty sure he would have happily lay down and slept without exchanging any words with her at all. She wasn't having that, if this was going to work *somebody* had to make the effort.

By the time she had chatted, and he had grunted a few replies, he began to thaw. She did get him to talk a little about what he had done that day. He had asked why she was interested, and she had pointed out that she'd no idea how a ranch ran, and she needed to know. He had also told her some of his plans to bring a new breed of cattle onto the ranch, of his desire to travel to other ranching areas and see how things were done, possibly to advise on the introduction of new stock. He had knowledge, and he wanted to spread it far and wide.

At the beginning of the second week David came to bed eager to talk.

"Father agreed! He said I could organize buying a bull and six cows. I know exactly who to contact because I had already told the man I would want the cattle, they are ready and waiting for me. The

cattle can be sent by rail through to Laramie. We can trail them home from there."

"That is good. I am glad your ideas are being accepted."

"Abe hasn't said much, and Josh is not at all impressed, but what Pa says, goes. I think Abe will come around when he sees the cattle."

"I do hope so."

Abby moved close against him, craving his warmth. She had known Wyoming was far colder than her home, the only time she truly felt warm was in bed at night, and that was because her husband was always warm, in body if not in manner.

Despite the fire in the kitchen, Abby was feeling cold again the next morning. She was fast realizing that it wasn't just the weather, it was the attitude of those around her. Zac Ferguson and Abe were unfailingly polite, Josh virtually ignored her, and Maybelle… well, she was polite enough when Zac was in the room, otherwise she was rude and dismissive. Even her husband was detached and uncommunicative when his family was present. The only one who was truly welcoming towards her was Joe.

When the breakfast pots had been washed and put away, a job which Abby did almost every morning, she decided she didn't want to spend her next hours trying to get along with a woman who obviously disliked her. Instead she pulled on her boots and her coat, added a wrap over the top, and stepped outside into the cold early November weather.

Charis had talked of her home which she shared with Ben, about two miles from the ranch. She needed to talk with the woman, to discover if her suspicions about David were true. If they were, she had no idea what she could or would do about it, but she needed to know.

Everyone had been talking of the coming snow, but today the sky was clear despite the cold wind. Her clothing was barely adequate, but if she walked fast she should stay warm enough. She set out to visit Charis, hoping her welcome would be warmer than Maybelle offered, even if she might damage that welcome with her questions.

As she walked she pondered on her recent marriage. She had expected a home of her own, Jeb Cornish had led her to believe she would get that. Instead she was living within another family. She knew that was the way of things for many married couples, many never had their own place, not until their parents passed on and handed over the property. But that could never happen for her and David. Abe would take on the ranch, most likely Josh and Maybelle would also remain. She could not imagine staying here with David, in

that house, forever.

Fact, she had come here to marry a stranger, and she had done exactly that, she just hadn't expected it to be so… hard.

Forever. She had signed her life over to her husband. Was this ever going to work? Maybe she was too impatient, but she wanted to know there would be a future, with his regard, their own home, and hopefully children.

She trudged along the trail, and after a short time she could see a cabin in the distance. The walk took her more than half an hour and she was thoroughly chilled by the time she arrived. The house was small compared to the ranch house, but plenty big enough for a single family. To Abby's relief smoke rose from the chimney, hopefully she could warm herself before the fire.

She mounted the steps onto the porch and a dog began barking within the house. She stepped forward to knock, but the door opened before she had the chance.

"Abby! Good day to you. To what do I owe this visit? I hope you are settling in?"

"Hardly," Abby was aware that her voice was discontented. The porch was not the place for this conversation, but she couldn't hold back the comment. "I feel like an interloper. Maybelle is anything but welcoming, and everyone else treats me like… a visitor. Everyone seems to expect me to up and leave."

"And David? Does he not help?

"Truthfully? Not much. When we are alone it's not so bad, but when we are with the family he behaves as if I am not there."

"Yes, I had noticed," Charis murmured.

Abby snapped her gaze up to meet her eyes, was it that obvious to everyone?

"Come on inside and we will have coffee," Charis continued. "You look a little chilly. Do you not have a thicker coat or a wrap? The weather is growing colder by the day, it will snow soon."

"Snow? Yes, I've heard, but I've never seen much snow."

"Oh yes, by Christmas the snow will be lying in every gully and it will be feet deep."

Abby gave a shiver, just thinking of it made her feel cold. She had brought her warmest clothes, but they were woefully inadequate for her new home.

"Come on inside, the coffee will warm you, and I have a nice fire burning."

Abby followed her into the cabin.

"This is a nice little house."

"Yes, it was my parent's house. After my mother died my father traveled and undertook all manner of projects. Finally when he

remarried he went to China, and he left me the house."

"So this was your house?"

Charis seated herself at the table after placing coffee before Abby.

"That wasn't quite how things went. My father was… a dreamer. All his projects ultimately failed, but he got lucky and won a gold claim. Then he sold that and went to China on yet another wild idea. He gave me the deeds to the house, but when I got home I found he had already sold the farm, and my hand in marriage, to the Ferguson family."

"Oh! Oh my!"

"Exactly! But I was lucky, Ben offered for me, and I love him dearly. But… this wasn't what I had originally intended. I wanted to become a veterinarian, but that never happened."

"But things turned out well for you."

"I learned not to tilt at windmills. I had to accept what I couldn't change, and the make the best of what I could. I can only advise you to do the same."

Abby eyed her resentfully. It was easy for her to talk, she loved her husband, and he was obviously enamored of her. Abby was stuck with a husband whose eyes strayed to his sister-in-law. Did Charis not realize that? Could she not see how hard that made things for Abby?

"So I am supposed to make the best of a husband who has eyes for another woman?"

Charis snapped her gaze back to Abby.

"David has another woman? So why did he marry you?"

"I never said that. For all I know he could have had dozens of other women before I met him. I said he *has eyes* for another woman."

"Who?" Charis demanded. "That is entirely unfair of him," she gave a resigned sigh, "and about what I would have expected. He has never been a very pleasant character."

"That is my husband you are insulting," Abby snapped. "And surely you must realize how much… how much he admires you." She uttered those last words through gritted teeth. At this moment she could find it in her heart to hate Charis, for her lack of perception and… well… just *because*.

"Me?" It came out as an astonished squeak. "That is ridiculous, David may have been grateful that I set him straight after his stupid behavior, and getting thrown in jail when he was last here, but he hardly admires me. He thinks I am a harpy, a domineering shrew. He told me so."

"He was thrown in jail?"

"He was. I suppose he never told you. Would you have married him if you had known?"

Abby considered for a moment. "Charis, I had very little choice

about my marriage. I arrived to be a mail-order bride, because the alternative was worse. In the end I did exactly what I had come here to do, married a stranger. The man I was supposed to marry was drunk and abusive, David was polite and helpful, he defended me. Of the two he was by far the better choice. I hope that there might be some spark of fondness between us in the future." She hesitated for a second. "Please, tell me why he was in jail."

"Ahh, that! David had some dubious friends in town. He was asked to look after a set of saddle bags, foolishly he agreed without discovering what they contained."

"And what was that?"

"The proceeds of cattle thefts! I have no idea how much. David did redeem himself by attempting to stop the thieves getting away with the money. Unfortunately for him he left it until after he had handed the saddle bags back. The result was a fight and some shooting, the thieves escaped and David was thrown in jail. Luckily the Sheriff and several townsfolk pursued and recaptured the men and recovered the money. Pa, that is Mr. Ferguson, managed to get David released from jail with no charges."

"And then David left?"

"Yes. Ben and I got married at Christmas in '72, David left in the New Year and we had not seen him again until now."

"Did you know where he had gone?"

"No. I know Pa worried that he had gone bad, but obviously he didn't. I told him before he went that he should learn the cattle business, from the business end rather than the nurturing of the animals. He is a clever man, he always was the brightest when it came to school work. He needed to find a direction, and I believe he has."

"And do you think that direction actually includes me?"

"How can it not include you? He married you."

"Yes, but… I think he may be regretting it."

"Oh, Abby. I do hope you can sort this out. I think we could be friends, you talk more sense than Maybelle, I do find she grates on me at times. Don't give up, yet. Just understand that there is nothing between me and David, never was, never will be. Now tell me more about your home in Mississippi."

Abby settled back in the chair, the coffee and the fire had warmed her, and the conversation had done a little to settle her doubts. She still wasn't wholly convinced about David's fondness for Charis, but if Charis didn't return the feelings, it was probably something and nothing.

"I lived in Natchez, which is a river town north of Baton Rouge. It is a town reliant on the river trade. My father was a river-boatman."

"And your mother?"

Abby considered for a moment, and avoided the truth. “While my father was alive, we lived in a small house on the bluff above the river in Vidalia. He died in a riverboat accident, during the war. After that we had to look after ourselves, we moved to Natchez and my mother… sold things, in a sort of… restaurant. I was eight when my Papa died.”

“And what did you do, before you came here?”

“I… cleaned.” It was true, she had cleaned up around the saloon and the bordello. She carried on talking, to avoid questions. “My mother decided it was no life for a young woman, she wanted me to marry and have a proper home and family. So we looked into mail-order brides. My mother studied many advertisements and sent off to an agency, in the end we chose Mr. Jeb Cornish. What a mistake that was!” She sighed. “He wrote a very convincing letter, or rather, he got a girl to write a letter for him.”

“Oh, that is too bad of him,” Charis sympathized. “I knew Jeb Cornish when we were at school, he was always a bit of a waste of space. Rarely coming to lessons, and causing trouble when he was there. I think you definitely dodged a bullet there. David… well, I cannot claim that David was my favorite as a child, far from it, but at least he attended school. He is very clever.”

“Why didn’t you like him?”

“Because…” Charis hesitated. “David always wanted to be noticed. He did things just to gain attention. At the time I despised him for it, since I’ve returned to Jessop Creek, I have realized that he did it because he felt he *needed* to. He was never the best at anything except school work, he did it to be seen.”

“I see,” Abby murmured softly. She wasn’t sure that she really did, but she would consider Charis’ opinions when dealing with her husband. “And Maybelle? Why is she so spikey all the time?”

“Because she is worried. As you know, she is expecting their first child, and she knows it will restrict what she can do. Her place will then indisputably be in the house, not out on the range. Maybelle loves to be out with the cattle, you must have realized she is no housewife. Am I right in thinking that you have already taken over many of the menial tasks?”

“Well, I suppose I have, but I was only trying to help.”

“And believe me, Maybelle will be only too happy for that help, while continually bemoaning the fact that you are trying to take over her position! I have tried to tell her she can’t have it both ways. I do think that after the baby is born she may be happier. When she falls in love with her child, she won’t want to be away on her horse, but at the moment she cannot imagine such a thing.”

“I see. When is the baby due?”

“Mid-March I am guessing. Can we ever be certain of such things?”

There was something about the way she said it that caught Abby’s attention. She was hardly an expert on child bearing, but she’d known a few expectant ladies, and Charis’ manner prompted her question.

“And you?”

“Me? Well...” She gave Abby a small smile. “I’m not certain, but… it could be early summer. I’ve been told many things go wrong in the first weeks, and it is only the first weeks, but… I can only hope. I’ve told no-one, not even Ben.”

“If it is what you want, I am happy for you,” Abby returned. “And I assure you I will say nothing, it is your secret to share when you are ready.”

“And you? Are you hoping for children?”

“I don’t know. When I decided to marry, of course it was there, on the horizon, but now… I don’t know. Of course I want a family, but does David? Where are we to live? We cannot stay in the house, the whole situation is too difficult, what with Maybelle, and the fact that Abe is the heir.”

“Yet another thing which bothers Maybelle. I have heard her saying that if Abe doesn’t marry and have his own heir, then he shouldn’t inherit the ranch. She believes she and Josh should have it, which is clearly nonsense. Pa will leave the ranch to Abe, and Abe will make his own decisions.” Charis refilled the coffee and pushed the plate of cakes in her direction. “I am glad you visited, I needed to talk with you, to clear the air. I need you to see that you are not unwelcomed, much though Maybelle may like to insinuate that you are.”

“But…”

“No, never think it. Zac is a hard man, but he is glad to see David home. Mark my words, he will try to keep him here, he didn’t want any of his boys to go. He was happy when Ben settled close, I think it likely he will offer David somewhere to build a house of his own. He believes family should stick together.”

“A house like this, close to the ranch so we could all be family?”

“I think so. Would you like that?”

“I think maybe I would.” Abby took another cake and munched it thoughtfully. “Tell me, why does Abe not marry? Has he been hurt? Did the love of his life marry another?”

“As far as I am aware, Abe has never so much as looked at a woman. There is talk in town, talk which we all ignore, but it’s there in case you should ever hear it.”

“Talk?”

“Talk that he prefers men, which as far as I’ve ever seen is also a

lie. He's never looked at a man either! He told me he would not marry because marriage is cruel to women."

"What?"

"His mother, Grace Ferguson, died a weary, worn-out woman. She birthed at least 15 children that I know of, it could have been more, as you must realize, only eight of them lived, and it's a hard life out here. Abe, as the eldest, saw her worn down by it, and he swore he would never do such a thing to any woman, hence, he vowed not to marry. He told me that his brothers could provide the heir, and he would not ever have feelings of guilt about personally making a woman suffer. It's a strange attitude, but you have to admire that he stands by what he believes."

"Oh, I see." Abby had to admit to surprise, but she couldn't help but agree with Charis, the man was to be admired for his consideration.

Charis stood to inspect the bread, rising on the back of the stove. That reminded her that she too had set loaves to rise, she needed to return to cook them. She doubted Maybelle would even notice since she had been intent upon her sewing, and it would not do to waste them. She glanced at the window, it was still grey and windy out there, the idea of leaving this warm kitchen was not pleasant, but she had to get back.

"I should go, it will take me a while to get home."

"Why don't you bring the buggy? Or ride a horse?"

"Because I have no clue how to harness a buggy, and I haven't ridden a horse since I was a child. I can ride, but I can hardly run off with one of the horses when I've not been given permission."

"Ask David! Better still, ask Joe, he has control of the ranch horses since Adam left." Charis moved to the cupboard in the corner. "Here, take this, that wrap is nothing like warm enough. You should get David to take you to town and get some winter clothes." She handed Abby a much heavier woolen wrap.

"I... Oh. Thank you. I will return it next time I see you."

"No, keep it until you have something better of your own. In fact, you can keep it anyhow. And don't forget to speak about the horse."

Abby took her leave and stepped out into the cold, she had a great deal to think about on this walk home. Charis had talked of her asking David for any number of things, like new clothes and a pony, when in fact she found it hard to talk to him of how his day had gone! She didn't feel able to make any demands of him until they could communicate better.

CHAPTER EIGHT

David had a great deal to think about as he rode out to check the cattle.

For the first week or so after their arrival at the ranch things had gone better than David had anticipated. His father had accepted him back more readily than he had expected, giving up his own room to accommodate them. He had been happy to hand over the book work for his son to peruse. He had talked with interest about cattle breeding and husbandry and agreed to buy several new animals from the man David had recommended. Those cattle would arrive in Laramie any day now. David knew from his recent experiences in the cattle business that these animals would improve the quality of their herd.

As to the other side of things, David felt as if he was living in a dream from which he must soon wake.

Dream? Or was it nightmare?

Abby was delightful, and she had been a willing wife. David had at first suspected she had been a dance hall girl, and possibly was not as innocent as she had pretended, but he had discovered her innocence was real. Now she was his, and he wasn't certain how he felt about it! How he felt about *her* was not in doubt, she made him feel warm all over, just by standing near. It was the state of marriage which he questioned, a commitment to which he'd given no thought before it had happened. The moment she had fallen into the road had sealed his fate, he had swept her into his arms, and he'd been captured. Until that second he'd felt nothing but anger at Jeb and sympathy for the girl. After that he had been bewitched, enough to spark the imprudent decision to marry her.

Over the last year or so he had worked so hard to control his tendency to make irresponsible decisions. Reckless and foolhardy was exactly what had landed him in jail back in '72. Now how had landed himself in a jail of a different kind, one from which he could not escape with any sort of honor. Marriage had not been sensible, because he had plans; he wanted to travel again, he wanted to pursue this idea of improving cattle herds, and he couldn't do that stuck here in one place.

He had married on a whim, now he had to live with it, somehow.

As to how Abby felt about this? He had no idea! She had married him because she had to, she'd had little or no choice; how was that the way forward to a good marriage? He couldn't help but look at his brothers. They had all married for love, true Maybelle and Josh rowed, but they loved each other, they always kissed and made up.

Charis and Ben too were in love and happy, and he couldn't help but look at Ben and still feel that twinge of envy. He had always liked Charis, he had tried so hard to impress her way back when they were children, but she had pushed him away. Now here he was, married to Abby, and Charis was always around. What was the best way forward? Did Abby care for him at all, or was she just grateful? Would those thankful feelings die, or were they enough to sustain a relationship?

The visit and talk with Charis had given Abby an insight into things, and it made dealing with Maybelle and her tantrums a bit easier. Truly, she felt the older woman behaved in a far less than mature fashion, she had never had to deal with adversity, and it showed.

This morning Maybelle chose to rant at her, and this time Abby felt she could retaliate with a degree of truthfulness.

"Pa gave you the best room. It should have been mine, for me and Josh. It's not *right* that you have it."

"Maybelle, if you are going to consider who should have what, that room, and indeed the house, should be Abe's. As the eldest son it is *his* inheritance," Abby returned reasonably. "As one of the younger sons, David will never inherit." She was also pretty sure he didn't actually want the ranch. Despite what Charis had said about another house here on the ranch, she knew that David had other ideas, ideas of travel and business many miles from here.

"But Pa is so impressed with David."

"That's as may be, I think he is glad that David has done something significant, that he hasn't gotten into trouble. But I am pretty certain David doesn't want the ranch, he… he wants to travel more, to go back to Texas, to travel North to Oregon and Montana, to go to California."

"He does?"

"Yes." And whether she was included in those plans was a thought which gnawed at her. Was she just to be the 'little woman', left at home and forgotten?

Maybelle returned to her sewing, she was making baby clothes, beautiful baby clothes. Abby had not yet had the opportunity to praise the workmanship, and maybe now was not the correct moment, but the time would come. If she could show Maybelle that she really was impressed with the work, would that ease things between them, even a little? At this very moment, Maybelle would surely see it as a placating gesture, and that was not what Abby needed.

She finished the pots and set the kettle back onto the stove. Any of

the men who were in the vicinity of the house would most likely drop in for a cup of coffee in the near future.

In the event, it was Joe and Josh who came through the door.

Last evening Abby had asked Joe about a pony. She had intended asking David, but as usual he was engrossed in discussing cattle breeding with his father and Abe. Joe had been only too happy to agree to find her a pony.

This morning he was obviously going to fulfil that promise.

"Hi, Abby, do you want to come out to the barn after coffee? I've got a pony for you to meet."

"A pony?" Maybelle was on it like a terrier on a rat.

"Yes, Abby needs a bit of transport. I've got the little one in."

"Oh, the little one, fine."

Maybelle dismissed it instantly. Obviously 'the little one' was too insignificant to interest her. As far as Abby was concerned 'the little one' sounded plenty to handle. David's huge horse, on which she had arrived here, had been intimidating in both size and strength.

Joe drank his coffee and stood to leave, Josh had already sat comfortably with his wife, and it was convenient that Abby too had the excuse to leave them alone.

"Grab your coat," Joe instructed. Abby did as she was told, taking the lighter wrap she had used yesterday, she didn't wish to dirty the one Charis had so kindly given her.

As they headed for the barn Joe glanced at her.

"Don't you have a proper coat?"

She gave a small shrug. "I didn't need one in Mississippi."

"Well you need one here! You will freeze with just that. Go on into the barn" He detoured into the bunk house, leaving her to hurry into the shelter of the barn. Once out of the wind it wasn't that cold. There were a number of horses in the stalls, all munching happily. She waited, wondering which was 'the little one', they all looked large to her.

Joe came in carrying a coat which he held out to her.

"Here, it's not smart, but it's gotten a bit tight for me. I have another, this is just a spare. You can have it."

"Oh, Joe, that is so kind of you." She accepted the coat, stood on tiptoe and planted a light kiss on his cheek. He wasn't as tall or as broad as her husband, so she could reach. Only after she had done it did she realize that she had never done such a thing to David. It seemed wrong, but he never seemed to encourage such an action.

Joe stepped back, blushing. "That's fine," he mumbled. "Hope it fits well enough."

She slipped it on, it was a little large, but it hardly mattered.

"Here is the little one."

Abby followed him to a stall where an unexceptional dark brown pony stood, already saddled and munching hay. He turned his head to Abby and she stroked his nose.

"What is his name?"

"No real name, we just call him 'the little one'. He doesn't get used over much, but he comes in handy if you need to get into the trees, or tight spaces, because he's not very big."

No name? Abby immediately decided she would name him. She couldn't ride a pony who was so little loved that he had no name.

"Do you remember how to get on?" Joe asked, reaching for the bridle on the stall end.

"I am out of practice, not incapable or stupid," Abby returned pertly. She moved to the pony's side and prepared to climb aboard.

"Ahh, just one thing," Joe observed, "maybe we should bridle him and get him out first?"

Abby glared at him for making fun of her, and reached for the bridle. The pony snuffled at her hands, and she stroked the white mark on his face. It was shaped like an untidy star. She would name him for those stars in the heavens.

She slipped the bridle onto his head and announced, "His name is Star."

"It is? How do you know that?" Joe teased.

"He just told me. Now, are we going to ride?"

"Any time you are ready. Are you happy enough for me to ride along with you, or would you prefer if I walked?"

"You can ride. We won't go far, will we?" Abby was well aware that her cotton skirts were hardly suitable for this.

"No, just down the trail a bit. I have to get back to work so I can't be long. I just need to discover how you get along with… Star. I need to know if I can safely leave you to get on with things!"

"I hope you can. Star seems sedate enough for me to manage."

They left the barn and Joe watched as she scrambled aboard. Star stood stoically during her rather less than proficient clamber. She landed in the saddle with a triumphant squeak, and grinned cheerfully at Joe.

"I'm ready."

"You sure are. I'll have to find you a hat to keep the wind off if you are intending to do any amount of riding."

"Indeed I will. I want to be able to visit Charis, and look around the ranch."

Joe laughed at her obvious pleasure. "Come on, let's give it a try."

Abby wasn't lying when she'd said she'd not ridden in years, the last time had been before her father died, when she was around eight years old, but she had little doubt she could manage. Joe hopped onto

his horse and they set off along the trail. It wasn't anything like as far from the ground as she had been on David's horse.

Joe looked back at her. "We trot?"

"Carry on, I am fine."

And so it proved. She felt a bit wobbly, and her skirts were hardly any protection, but after a few minutes of trotting and a bit of loping, she was convinced she could manage. Star was obliging, he steered when she asked, he also stopped when she asked, what more could she want?

"This is fine, Joe. I think I can manage. What do you think?"

"I think you are right. I will make sure the pony isn't used for anything else, he will be there when you want him."

"And the harness?"

"That too. I will show you where it is kept."

They headed back to the barn to put the pony away.

Abby jumped off. Her legs felt a bit odd, not exactly painful, but a bit stiff and stretched. Joe watched her as she eased her back.

"I hope you won't be too sore after that."

"You think I will be?"

"You've used muscles you've not used before, certainly not since you last rode. It will wear off, particularly if you ride again tomorrow. Just keep it short until you get used to it."

CHAPTER NINE

The following morning Abby was up early to assisted Maybelle with the breakfast. She made the biscuits and collected the eggs and the milk from the barn, where it had been left in the cool by whoever had milked the cow. Maybelle seemed happy enough to slice the bacon and cook the eggs, but the baking was left to Abby.

She cleared away the breakfast things after the men had eaten, and set to making bread. Finally she set the loaves to rise, and returned to the loft to change into her oldest dress once more, intending to ride Star.

"Where are you going? To see Charis again?"

Abby turned to answer. "No, today I am going to ride Star for a while. I won't ride as far as Charis' house until I have had a little more practice. I doubt I will be particularly speedy and getting him ready, since it is the first time I have done it by myself."

"Would you like me to help you?"

Maybelle's offer came as a surprise. After a few seconds of consideration, Abby decided she should accept this as a possible olive branch.

"That would be very kind. I need to do it myself, but if you could watch, and make sure I don't do it wrong, that would be a great help."

Maybelle laid aside her sewing and moved to collect her coat. Abby decided to try to build a little more camaraderie. She moved to inspect the robe Maybelle was sewing.

"This is very well made, Maybelle. If you have a little girl she will have the prettiest clothes. Did you make your own dress too?"

"Not this one," Maybelle admitted. "I used to enjoy embroidery during the dark winter evenings. Now I can't get out and about I have turned to sewing. Josh won't let me ride my pony."

Abby was well aware of the disgruntled note in her voice. Maybe this was the cause of her ill-humor? The loss of freedom? Wasn't freedom exactly what *she* was seeking by riding Star? Abby had to admit some sympathy for that feeling, but there was good reason for it.

"I have heard that riding a horse is not good for a lady in your condition."

"That's exactly what Josh says." Maybelle gave a sigh.

"You are not feeling too great either, I expect riding might make you feel worse."

"I think it would make me feel better," Maybelle argued. "I was told the sickness would pass, but it hasn't. No doubt by the time it has

I will be too fat to get aboard anyhow." She gave another sigh of resignation.

Abby reached for the coat from the rack behind the door.

"Where did you get that?" It sounded like an accusation.

"Joe gave it to me. He said it was too tight for him."

"Hmmp, you don't have many warm clothes, do you? I would think David should have done something about that by now."

"I've never needed any, Mississippi is a great deal warmer, and I don't imagine David has even realized, he has been very busy with the cattle." Abby defended him in an unaggressive tone, she felt like telling Maybelle to mind her business, but at this stage in their relationship that may not be a wise move. She moved to open the door. "I must get on, the loaves need to be done when I have ridden."

Maybelle accompanied her to the barn where Star was waiting in the corral, eating hay. The first job was catching him, yesterday he had been in a stall. Abby went into the barn and collected her bridle, only to meet Maybelle leading the pony into the barn as she went to return.

"There is a rope headstall on the gate to catch him with."

"Oh, thank you, I didn't know."

From then on Maybelle took great delight in shadowing, and correcting every move she made. Abby was fairly certain she'd not done much wrong, but to listen to Maybelle, she was completely incompetent. It served her right for accepting the woman's offer to help!

Finally she led Star from the stall and climbed aboard.

"I will see you in a while, I am not going very far."

She felt Maybelle's jealous eyes on her back as she rode from the yard. The last half an hour had been a lesson in forbearance. Maybelle had criticized her constantly, but she had only herself to blame. No matter, she had harnessed Star unaided, and now she knew she could manage alone.

Two days later Abby saddled up and headed off to visit Charis. She and Ben had come around for supper the night before, and Charis had confirmed she would be happy to see Abby and her pony the next morning.

The ride was uneventful, but she was glad to put Star in the barn and join Charis in front of the fire for a hot mug of coffee.

"How is it going?"

"Oh, Star is great. I'm so pleased Joe found him for me to ride."

"That wasn't quite what I meant. How are things going at the

ranch? With you and David? And Maybelle of course?"

"Ahh, well… Maybelle is still a bit difficult, but I am learning to work around her."

"And David?"

Abby stared into the fire, avoiding Charis' gaze. What could she say? David doesn't like me much? David thinks I am convenient, but I don't know for how long?

"David is not… David doesn't… talk to me very much."

Charis didn't answer, Abby flicked her gaze across to the older woman, to find she was regarding her visitor with a small frown.

"Abby, I don't mean to pry, or to be indelicate but… I know you have not been together very long, and… well… it only takes once."

It only took Abby three seconds to realize what Charis was asking, her mother had said much the same thing when warning her about men. She raised her chin and faced her boldly. "If a child should come along, I would love it and care for it as any mother should."

"Yes, well," Charis gave a small cough of embarrassment. "I had sort of wondered if you had… if he had… well… you obviously know what I mean, but I had wondered if you had… waited."

"Let's not creep around this. We share a bed, and I am his wife. We have not *waited*."

"So…" Charis pushed on, "what of David? Has he given any thought at all to the possibility of a child? I get the feeling that you believe he is not committed to this marriage. Has he said anything to confirm this?"

"No, he has said nothing." Abby gave a small shrug. "When it is just the two of us, he is fine, but when his family are around he ignores me, he so… defensive all the time."

Charis nodded sympathetically. "I do understand. As I said before, he has always struggled to find a place within the family. It was something I could never see as an only child, now I have become part of this larger family I can appreciate how he felt. He was lost in the crowd. He so badly wanted to be important, I don't think he has ever got past that."

"But he is important, he's… a good man."

"I believe you are right. There was a time when I didn't believe it, but he has taken a correct turn. I believe you can help him find his way."

"That's not easy when he doesn't talk to me," Abby lamented.

"I think he will come around. Now, tell me do you have anything nice to wear for the Thanksgiving social?"

Abby regarded her in surprise. "Social?"

"Oh, yes. Only a couple of weeks away. It will be held in the church rooms, with food and dancing. We will all be expected to take

along a plate of food."

"Food?" Abby echoed faintly.

"Obviously no-one has thought to tell you!"

"Maybe I won't go."

"Of course you will go, David will want you there at his side."

"He will?"

"Abby, have a bit of faith. It will be fine. You can come with me to the next ladies meeting and get an idea of what is happening."

"I… oh. I really don't have many clothes."

Charis looked at her cotton dress. "That's well seen, I can't believe David is letting you ride in that!" She stood. "I have an old split skirt which will be far more suitable. It's not smart, and Ben bought me a new one this summer, but you are welcomed to it until your husband actually gets his head on straight and buys you what you need." She cast her a reproving look. "Ask him! In fact tell him it is time he took you shopping."

"I don't like to bother him."

"Bother him, my eye! It's his responsibility."

She opened the larger trunk in the corner, and after rummaging for a few moments, produced a dark green skirt. She glanced at Abby, and picked up a shirt. "Do you have any shirts?"

"No, just dresses."

"And very few of those too! I could give you several things, but that is not the point." She frowned. "Next time I see that husband of yours I will be giving him a piece of my mind, I can tell you."

"Oh no, please don't."

"Why not? Someone needs to. I do understand that maybe you don't want to keep on at him, but he needs to think of others a bit more."

"He did," Abby muttered. "He rescued me."

"And now he should look after you," Charis returned tartly. "Don't worry, I won't berate him in front of the others, if there is one thing David hates it is to lose face."

Abby opened her mouth to argue, and realized she would get nowhere. Charis had opinions, and where David was concerned they were not benevolent. In her eyes he had not redeemed himself, yet. As far as Abby was concerned, her husband had given her a chance of a life she had never experienced, she might wish for more, but she did appreciate what she had already gained.

She accepted the clothes gratefully.

"Go on, put them on," Charis insisted. She glanced at the window. "You will need to go very soon, you may as well be warmer on your way home."

Abby stripped off her dress, horribly conscious that her

undergarments had seen better days. She knew Charis didn't miss that either. To her embarrassment, Charis returned to the trunk to dig a little more while she was pulling on the shirt and skirt.

"Ahh, found it." She held up a woolen jerkin. "This will go under your coat and add another layer. It's not smart, but it's warm."

"Charis, I am very grateful, but you can't keep giving me things."

"Of course I can. Just make sure you let David know that it's time he looked to your needs. I will say nothing as long as you agree to speak with him."

"I will," Abby returned earnestly. Eventually; she would choose her moment carefully, she was unsure of his temper, and Charis' opinion of David did not help her confidence.

She rode home feeling a good deal warmer than she had on her outward journey. She now felt set up for the winter. She'd never had much, and what she now owned was at least enough to keep her warm.

CHAPTER TEN

David had been home for almost three weeks, and he was beginning to feel less of an interloper. He kept wondering how his wife really felt about this life. It wasn't her choice, but as far as he could make out, she'd never *had* much choice. He reflected that many women must be in a similar position. He was glad he was a man, life wasn't ever easy, but as far as he could see, life for a woman was so much harder.

He led Trooper into the barn, out of the vicious wind. It was growing colder by the day, with frequent snow flurries. They had not had any significant fall of snow as yet, but already it was starting to build up along the trails. Soon the winter storms would arrive, and dump many inches of snow, at least living here they knew the score, and were well prepared.

David was checking his horse's shoes when Abe walked into the barn.

"Hi, Abe."

"Good day to you too. I need to speak with you, little brother."

David straightened up. "Yes?"

"What are you doing? You have a beautiful wife and you all but ignore her."

David regarded his brother with a scowl and a shrug. He couldn't help the embarrassment at such words, because he knew it was true.

"She ignores me, you mean. She's a whole lot more attached to Joe than she ever is to me."

"Because Joe found her a pony, and he talks to her. They are friends, brother, that is all."

"Hmmp."

"Are you still carrying a torch for Charis?"

David snapped his gaze back to his older brother.

"I never…"

"Oh come on, David. I may be older and greyer, and as far as everyone is concerned, not in any way interested in women, but I have eyes to see. You have always had an eye for a pretty girl, and the very first was Charis, when you were a lad. And you may well have loved her ever since she saved your sorry hide two years back. Fact, she loves Ben and she will never look twice at you."

"I know that!" David snapped. "I would never dream of coming between them."

"Never said you did. But it's time you put it to rest and concentrated on the pretty woman you *do* have."

"But… she's not *interested*."

"Says who? She is lonely, David. It's not surprising she turns to Joe, he is nice to her, he chats and makes her feel wanted. She doesn't fit well with either of the women; Maybelle resents her, and she is wary of Charis, because of *you*. If you were not attracted to her, and didn't intend making a go of this, why did you marry her?"

"I… I felt I had to."

"Why?"

"Because it was the right thing to do, Cornish was trying to force her, and it wasn't right."

"But you could have paid him off, and sent her on her way. I think there was more to it, you just won't admit it," Abe finished shrewdly.

David stared at his brother. When had he, a confirmed bachelor, become such an expert on relationships? Because he was right. The fondness for Charis lingered, but what he felt for Abby was quite different. She lit a fire in his blood, but he couldn't tell her, because he was fairly sure she merely tolerated him, grateful for the way he had rescued her.

He cared, but he didn't dare tell her. He didn't dare admit that he could be a slave to a pretty little woman if he allowed those feelings free rein. He kept an emotional distance, because if she did not return his affection it would be devastating for his pride as well as his heart.

He knew Abe was right, he had to make more effort, or she might up and leave, the way he had told her she could that day in the judge's office.

"You are right. I must try harder," he returned stiffly.

"No, brother, you must *give*, you've got to let her in. Maybe what you need is softer, not harder. Talk to the girl." Abe turned and left him to his thoughts.

He turned it over and over in his mind, trying to think what he could do to make things better.

He was to travel to Laramie to collect the cattle, before he did that maybe he needed to take his wife to town and buy her some winter clothes? He'd been thinking about it, he'd just not done it. Tomorrow he would bite the bullet. He knew Abe was right, but it wasn't easy to allow his feelings out. What if she pushed him away?

"Hey, Abby, would you like to go to town today to get some warmer clothes?"

Abby stirred and eased away from her husband's warm body. Every morning she woke snuggled against him. She didn't do it consciously, and he didn't seem to object, but she still found it a little embarrassing.

“You don’t have to work?”

“I have the time to take you to town. We can pick up anything needed for the ranch from the mercantile at the same time. It will save anyone else having to ride in for a day or two. It’s likely to snow soon, not just flurries, a proper heavy fall.”

Abby eased away from him, “I must get up and start breakfast. When will we leave?”

“I will speak with Pa, I will let you know at breakfast.”

Abby pulled on her dress, trying not to stare at her husband as he too dressed. It was the same every morning, she kept her eyes cast down so she didn’t see his naked chest, the strong muscles in his arms. Except she *did* see, every morning she got glimpses, and she wished she could feast her eyes, properly. He was what her mother would have called a magnificent specimen of a man.

She hurried down to the kitchen, stoked the fire and set to making biscuits. Maybelle had still not appeared before the biscuits were in the oven. Finally she entered the room, looking less than happy.

“Tea?” Abby questioned. She discovered the woman did not want coffee, apparently it made her feel ill. Maybelle nodded, and plonked down at the table. This happened every morning. When she had drunk her tea, she would slice the bacon. She didn’t leave everything to Abby, but she was perfectly happy to have the tasks taken from her. Abby still wasn’t certain if Maybelle was grateful, or resentful.

“David is taking me to town after breakfast. Is there anything we need from the mercantile?”

“To town? Why?”

Abby squashed a sharp retort. “I need a winter dress, this one is a bit thin.”

“Oh,” Maybelle eyed her critically. “Yes, you certainly need one.”

Abby wondered if the woman could ever say something to her which was not critical or insulting? Certainly, she’d not managed anything much, yet.

The men came in for their breakfast; as usual they all ate a hearty meal as befitted hard working menfolk. Abe and Zac were unfailingly polite, thanking her for the meal, Joe was friendly, and Josh treated her as if she was invisible. Today David was more forthcoming than normal.

“Are you ready to go to town after breakfast?”

“I will be, as soon as I have done the pots and put the bread to rise. How long will we be? I will need to return in time to bake the bread.”

David shot a glance at Maybelle. “Surely Maybelle can bake the loaves when they are ready?”

Maybelle looked sour, but Zac ended her protest before it began.

“Sure Maybelle can cope. You take your wife to town and buy her clothes fit for the weather which will soon arrive. Can’t have her freezing to death.”

Zac’s word was law. Maybelle still didn’t look happy, but she didn’t argue. Abby reflected that everyone now knew that if there was no bread baked today, it would not be her fault.

She dashed through the pot washing, and set the bread on the back of the stove before tidying herself as best she could. At least she had Joe’s old coat.

David came in to tell her the buggy was ready.

“I suggest you bring a blanket, there are two in the outhouse we use in the buggy when it is cold. Bring both.”

Abby did as she was asked, and stepped out into a chilly morning. David was right about the need for a blanket.

He handed her into the buggy and, once he was aboard he spread the blankets across both their knees before sending the pony off at a smart trot.

“It looks like snow.”

Abby looked up at the sky. “More snow?”

“A great deal more snow. What we have had so far is only a sprinkling. It will snow before Christmas, and even more in the New Year. We may end up with several feet in the gullies.”

“Several feet?” Abby echoed.

“Yes,” He glanced at her worn boots. “I think a pair of boots will also be necessary, as well as some thicker stockings.”

“Whatever you say.”

“You might sound a bit pleased about it!”

“I am,” Abby returned rather breathlessly. “Really, I am grateful for everything you have done for me. New dresses, and boots will be… wonderful. I’ve never had… much.” She almost said that she’d never had a new dress, which sounded too much like seeking sympathy.

He cast her a rather doubtful glance. “Do you make your own clothes too?”

“I have sewed quite a bit.” In truth all her dresses had been hand-me-downs which she had altered to fit.

“Maybe there will be some cloth that you like, you can do some sewing in the evenings, the way Maybelle does.”

“Thank you, that would be lovely.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

David sent the pony speedily along the roadway. The track was well used, and the day was too chilly to hang around. More speed required more concentration, which didn't allow for much conversation. That hardly mattered because he couldn't seem to get her to talk. She was so polite, so grateful, thanking him for everything, seemingly surprised that he wanted to buy things. Did she really believe he was that uninterested in her as a woman? Did she think he saw her as a mere convenience? That idea made him angry, which did not help the way he talked to her. Why was it so hard to open up to her as Abe had suggested?

Talking was a two way thing. Never before had David had problems when talking to a lady, he'd been good at it, and women had liked him. Why did that dubious talent vanish every time he tried to talk to Abby? Every time he had tried to charm her, and he *had* been good at that, she had presented him with a blank front, as if she didn't want to get to know him. Abe had told him to let her in, but she was the one who needed to open the door, even a crack.

He had guessed far more than she had realized, and he suspected she had lied. He knew she had not been a working girl in that sense, as her husband that had been obvious, but he knew her past life had been far less respectable than she wanted him to believe.

Truth be told, he really didn't care, his own history was far from decorous. How could he show her that they could put their pasts behind them, together?

Unless he told her, straight.

"Abby, there are things in my past which I wish I could forget; there are things which I hope I never have to tell you. I believe you are the same. I know you don't want to discuss it, and I am willing to leave it in the past. Can we both accept that neither is perfect, and leave our pasts behind us?"

He could feel her eyes on him while she considered what he had said. She wasn't a girl who committed without thought, even if she had taken the step of marrying a stranger.

"David, I am prepared to take my life from here, as it comes, with no reference to the past. But you have to accept that at some point, that past may affect our future." She glanced around the windswept range before continuing. "I need to be convinced that you actually want this, that you want *me*. This marriage was not something you had intended. I need to be sure you are not regretting your generous impulse."

“How am I supposed to convince you that I don’t regret this?”

“You could behave as if you are pleased to be with me when your family is around.”

David bit back a sharp retort. He shouldn’t deny it, because he knew it was true, Abe had said exactly the same thing.

“I don’t mean to, but my family isn’t small, and I needed to talk with them all, individually, to let them know… that I belong here.”

“And that means you don’t talk with me?”

He glanced back at her, sitting stiffly beside him.

“At times it seems you don’t want to talk to me, that you prefer Joe.”

“Joe doesn’t treat me as if I am invisible.”

“I am sorry, Abby. I will try harder.”

“I think that’s the real problem. You shouldn’t need to try, it should come naturally.”

“I had never thought of being married, it’s a bit of a shock to me. I hope I will improve. I know I am not like Ben or Josh, but I’m not Abe either, I hadn’t any great desire not to marry, I just hadn’t quite… got to it.”

Abby turned towards him and gave him a small smile. “I do realize that. I arrived here to marry a stranger, but I believed it was a stranger who was ready for a wife. Please, don’t pretend I’m not there. Speak to me when you get home, make some pretense of wanting to know how my day went, and I will do the same for you.”

“I will, I promise. And believe me, I don’t regret this, I just haven’t quite got the hang of it yet.”

They drove into Jessop Creek a short while later. Abby found she was unconsciously looking about for Jeb Cornish, she did not wish to meet that man ever again. They pulled up outside a small property which Abby had not noticed on her last, and only, trip to the town. It was not what she had expected.

As she stepped down she glanced along the street to the mercantile; he noticed.

“We will go there later. Now we need to see Mrs. Knights. She is a seamstress and she also has cloth and some ready-made dresses.”

“Oh, a dress shop.”

David escorted her through the door to greet Mrs. Knights.

The woman was not alone, there were two younger women sewing industriously, one using a treadle sewing machine. Abby was aware that the girl who was hand sewing fixed her gaze on David the second he walked into the room.

“Good Morning, Mrs. Knights. My wife is in need of some warmer clothing.”

“Certainly, Mr. Ferguson. Lila, the tape measure.”

The girl at the machine rose and approached with her measure.

"If you please, Ma'am, could you remove your coat."

Abby stood to be measured. The second girl wasted no time in engaging David in conversation, she saw him nod and bend forward slightly to catch what she was saying. They obviously knew each other, maybe she was a past lady friend? Maybe they were still friends? Her heart sank to her boots. He could talk that way to *this* woman, but not to her!

"Mr. Ferguson, can you tell me what we are looking for? Do you need things immediately, or do we have a day or two to sew them?"

Abby was relieved to see him step away from the girl, offering her a tight little nod.

"We would like something now if that is possible. My wife can choose some fabric too and I believe she wishes to sew one for herself."

Mrs. Knights studied the list of measurements. "This way, please." She swept aside the rear curtain and ushered them into the rear room, where a rail of dresses stood along the wall. "Now these should fit you. If you need small alterations we could do that immediately." She removed a brown dress from the rail. "How about this?"

Abby opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by David.

"Too dull."

"But it is practical," she insisted.

"Covered in flour?" David questioned. "Don't forget, I have seen you cooking!"

Abby felt her mouth drop open. Had he just *teased* her? In a rather affectionate manner?

"I… umm…"

"Or this one?" Mrs. Knights now held a darkish blue dress. It looked cozy, and despite the fact it was plain, Abby knew she wanted it.

"Yes, that is very nice."

"Hmmp, that is practical, it's hardly elegant or pretty."

"I am doing housework, I am not going to a party."

David shrugged. "Try it on, but you do need a dress for a party, the Thanksgiving Social is in ten days."

"If Mrs. Ferguson would like to choose some fabric, we can make a more suitable party dress. We don't carry such things on the readymade rail. That is the beauty of a sewing machine, we can run up a dress in little more than an afternoon."

"Try it on," David said. "While you are at it get some new underwear and a new nightdress."

Abby felt her cheeks burn at his words. She knew her undergarments were a disgrace, but did he need to discuss them in

front of Mrs. Knights? She caught the woman's eye, expecting to see a haughty disapproval, instead the woman's eyes were dancing with amusement.

"Certainly, Mr. Ferguson. So shoo, out you go." She banished him from the room before turning back to Abby. "Ahh, those Ferguson boys. Always was a bit of a devil, Mr. David. I can see he hasn't improved."

Silently Abby removed her worn dress and allowed Mrs. Knights to see what was beneath.

"Ahh, I see what your husband means." She bustled to the curtain on the far side of the room, and pulled it back to reveal the underwear. "Now, this should do, and this, and what about this?" She held up a small laced corset. "I can see you don't wear one, but they do keep out the cold tolerably well." She handed the things to Abby and indicated the dressing screen. "Put them on, then come out and we will fit the dress."

Abby did as she was bid. The corset laced at the front, she pulled it so it was firm, but not so tight she couldn't move. As soon as she moved out from behind the screen, Mrs. Knights slipped the blue dress over her head. It fitted tolerably well, certainly no worse than many things Abby had worn in the past.

"Hmm, it is a little loose, but you are very slight, you could do with a bit more meat on you. Come, let us show your husband."

She ushered Abby back into the shop area. David was inspecting the bolts of cloth, the girl he had spoken with earlier was in close attendance.

"Sarah, please get on with your work," Mrs. Knights wasted no time in correcting her employee. Abby couldn't help but notice the look the girl threw in her direction.

"What do you think, Mr. Ferguson? Will this do?"

David nodded. "If you like it, and you are comfortable. Now come and chose some pretty material for your going out dress."

Abby moved to join him; Mrs. Knights dropped her old clothes onto a chair and followed.

"Now, I think you need something a little more fitted, with a fuller skirt. What color would you like?"

Abby eyed the pile of material in awe, never before had she been offered a choice like this. "Not too pale," she ventured. "Maybe a mid-blue, or green?"

"This one," David pulled out a bolt of fabric. It was sea green, with a sheen to it. "I like this, what do you think?"

Abby ran her hand over the material, it was so much richer than anything she had ever owned. "It's lovely."

"That's decided, this one Mrs. Knights. I trust you can make a

dress in a flattering style for my wife. Obviously not too risqué, but I would prefer it not to be too matronly."

"Certainly we can do that. I think we could have it ready by the end of the week."

"Do you want some fabric to sew for yourself?" David asked.

Abby's head was spinning by this point, the idea that he was spending so much money made her feel a little nauseous. "I um… well…, maybe a skirt and blouse would be sensible?"

"Of course it would," Mrs. Knights agreed. "How about this for a blouse?" She lifted a bolt of pale blue cotton. "Then you can have a navy skirt, very practical."

Abby could only nod in agreement.

"I hope you are going to replace those worn out boots, she can hardly go to the Social in those," Mrs. Knights observed as she measure out and cut the necessary fabric for the blouse.

"The mercantile is our next stop," David informed her.

Five minutes later the fabric was measured, cut and packed to take home and David was finding the money to settle the bill. Abby reached for her old clothes, still lying on the chair.

"You don't need those, Mrs. Knights can get rid of them."

"But… I can repair the underwear," Abby objected. "Spares are always useful."

"So take the underwear, the dress needs burning."

"But…"

"No, you do not need it," He turned back to Mrs. Knights. "Was the brown dress the only other one in my wife's size?"

"I am afraid so, but we could make another if you…"

"No, that is fine, we will take the brown dress too, just burn her old one. And add a couple of pairs of stockings to the pile."

Abby stared at him in disbelief, never before had anyone spent money on her this way, it was delightful, and embarrassing too. It should have made her happy, but the two girls on the other side of the shop spoiled that feeling.

She could see them muttering together, and it didn't take much to know what they were talking about. The girl who had been talking to David fixed her with a spiteful glare. It fed the impression she was getting about people's opinion of her husband, Mrs. Knights had called him a bit of a devil, he seemed attracted to Charis; had he been a womanizer? Was she so insecure that she was seeing problems where they did not exist?

David paid the bill and picked up the rather large bundle. "Come, we need to get you some boots."

He placed the bundle under the buggy seat and escorted her along the sidewalk to the mercantile.

"Thank you."

He gave her a brief smile. "It was time I bought you a few things."

She looked up at him as they walked. She had thought him handsome the day she married him but now, clean shaven with just his tidy moustache, he was even better looking. No wonder the girls all stared at him. They wanted him, and she had him! Whatever people might say about his past, she knew he was a good man. If she could hold onto him, she would.

At the mercantile she was fitted with a lovely pair of everyday boots, and David insisted on a second pair for riding the pony.

Two pairs of boots!

Never before had she owned *two* items of footwear.

"When the warmer weather comes you can get some lighter slippers for around the house, but they are not fit to wear outside, what with rocks and snakes and things," David observed.

Abby was too overwhelmed to argue.

They had been in town for almost two hours. Had David been alone, he would most likely have ventured into the café. Had he been here and alone in his *previous* life, he would have gone into the saloon, but those days had passed.

He considered the café, but decided against it. Abby kept telling him she wanted to talk, but once again she had clammed up. He had known enough women to expect endless chatter and even excitement when in the dress makers. Abby had been disturbingly quiet. He had hoped this expedition might bring them closer, but he wasn't sure if it had worked.

"Time to go home." He steered her in the direction of the buggy. "Can't leave the pony standing any longer, he must be cold."

"Oh, the poor thing."

As they arrived at the buggy she released his arm and stepped into the road to stroke the pony's nose.

"Is he all right?"

"He is fine," David returned. "He has had a rest and he is ready to warm up by trotting home."

"Oh, that's good. Shall I get in?"

"Go ahead."

David unhitched the pony and moved to help her, only to see her lift her skirts and hop unaided onto the buggy seat.

Unladylike? Or maybe it was more undemanding! She didn't simper and demand he helped her with every little thing. He had always liked women, but he'd often found some of their ways a little

irritating. Women who pretended they were so delicate that they couldn't get their feet wet were good only as decoration. His wife was both decorative and strong. If only he could get to know her better, but every time he tried he seemed to fail.

They trotted from the town as another light flurry of snow filled the air. He felt her huddle against him and pull the blanket close.

"You have spent a great deal of money on me today."

David glanced down at her. Was this why she had gone quiet? Did she believe he was being reckless with his money? She'd had very little in her life, maybe it worried her that he was not a penny pincher.

"I have earned and saved over a long period. I am not destitute, Abby. I may not be some rich landowner, but I can afford to feed and clothe my wife in a suitable fashion. Many women demand their husbands buy all manner of fripperies, you have asked for nothing. Everything I bought you was necessary."

"I just wanted you to know that I am very grateful."

"So why are you not happy?"

"I… I am happy!"

"Really?"

She glanced up at him and looked away. Finally she answered with another question.

"Who was that girl?"

She was jealous? He felt his heart do a little skip.

"Miss Sarah Jepson, daughter of a farmer from the far side of town. Past classmate. I've known her forever. She… always seemed rather keen on me."

"And what were you to her?"

"As I said, she was a classmate, she was two years my junior. After I left school I didn't look to school girls." He sighed. "Abby, you have to understand, I am a man, I was no angel when I was younger, particularly when I was away from here. You have already heard some of my history. I cannot change my past."

"I just need to know that it *is* your past," Abby murmured.

"I have a wife, you. Why should I need more?"

That seemed to satisfy her, she snuggled closer as the snow blew. No doubt she was as grateful as he was to see the ranch buildings looming from the white haze.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Two days later Abby waved goodbye to her husband as he headed to Jessop Creek on his way to collect his cattle. There was too much to be done on the ranch for one of his brothers to go with him, so he intended hiring someone, possibly from town.

The trip should take three or four days at most, and he should be back well in time for the Thanksgiving Social.

Abby was feeling a bit safer since David had spent money and bought dresses. After their talk he had done exactly as he had promised, he had spoken to her when he came in from work, he had asked her about her day. It still felt false to Abby, if he had any feelings for her they remained hidden. She did accept that she too was reluctant to reveal her feelings. He was a handsome man, a good man, but she honestly didn't know how she felt about him.

She'd not become a mail-order bride with any ideas of a love match. That was not something which happened to women like her, that was for well off ladies who could make real choices. She had hoped for a man with a similar outlook, one who wanted a pleasant, competent wife to ease his life. Some of the mail-order letters she had read had talked of loneliness. She now recognized that feeling.

Lonely; she might be in a crowd, but the only one here who returned affection was the pony. Charis was friendly, as was Joe, the others were pleasant, except for Maybelle. No-one loved her, not the way her mother had loved her. She missed her mother so badly that she lay awake at night and cried quietly for that love.

She had little doubt her husband appreciated her in his bed, but she'd known all about that before she'd ever embarked on the journey. How it was between a man and a woman did not need to include affection. In truth, she'd never seen a man display any sort of affection to a woman until she had seen the Ferguson couples together. She had always assumed her father loved her mother, but in her memory he was just… there, he wasn't particularly a loving figure.

Was an affectionate man a rarity?

Was she being dreadfully naïve to even consider David might harbor some sort of fondness for her? If she annoyed him, or he tired of her in his bed, would she be turned out? He had said they could part if it didn't work, at what point would he consider it 'didn't work'? Was she to be cast aside?

She wasn't ungodly; she knew the words of her small bible said she was bound to her husband for life. She also knew that there were

men, and women too, who did not follow God's word. All she could do was pray that she was safe, that her life would not turn into a nightmare once more.

Maybe she did know what she felt. On top of the loneliness she felt envy when she watched the couples, mainly Ben and Charis. They were so obviously in love. He touched her when they were close, stroked her hand, stroked her cheek. When he thought no-one was looking he would drop a kiss on her head, or her cheek. Abby watched them from beneath her lashes and wished she could receive such affection. Then she looked at her husband and felt… cheated. She wanted to be able to touch him the way Charis touched Ben.

She wondered what would happen if she actually dared to kiss him?

He had never kissed her, not properly, not the way she had seen Ben kiss Charis. He had dropped a peck on her cheek the day they married, and maybe once since. It didn't speak of any growing feelings between them.

Now he was away, collecting the cattle, she felt abandoned. The bed was cold every night. Was he missing her, or was she doomed to disappointment? How was she going to make this better?

Two days before the Thanksgiving Social, David arrived back with the new cattle. It had been a hard few days, these cattle were not 'trail wise' and used to being herded, they had also spent several days in rail wagons, and they were understandably skittish.

David had hired a man to go with him to Laramie. He had gone to the saloon in Jessop Creek and offered work to his old friends; none had been interested except for Mr. Paulie Carne, a fellow who he had only met briefly on his arrival back in town. With no other takers for the job, he had employed the man, and he had been happy to find that Carne had obviously done a fair bit of cattle herding. He paid the man a bonus, because he appreciated the help.

They penned the cattle in the corral for the night, and Carne stayed for a meal before riding back to Jessop Creek.

"Well, David, I have to say, I like the look of your cattle." Zac Ferguson settled back to enjoy his coffee.

"They will take a while to settle in, they've done a lot of miles. I hope they will settle into the herd with no problems."

"I would think so. Maybe we should keep the bull away from the others for a day or two, until they settle?"

"Not a bad idea, they will quiet down when the weather gets worse," David observed.

“True,” Zac agreed.

“Hmmp,” Josh muttered. “Be interesting to see if they survive the winter.”

“Why shouldn’t they? There is snow in Minnesota, and that’s where they were raised,” David returned sharply.

Josh gave a shrug. David saw Abby place Josh’s coffee in front of him. He didn’t acknowledge her. For half a second David saw red at his off-hand manner, he opened his mouth to snarl at his brother, and caught his wife’s eye. She gave a small shake of her head. He looked back into his own coffee, he felt as if he had steam coming from his ears.

How did Abby know that he was about to explode? The girl knew him better than he had realized!

She moved around the room, collecting used plates from the table and putting them in the sink, when she passed behind him she ran her fingers lightly across his shoulders. It sent a shiver through him. He swallowed down his coffee and rose to his feet, picking up the remaining plates from the table. He was not surprised to see Maybelle had not risen to help with washing the crocks. He stepped to the sink.

“Shall I wash? Then you can wipe and put away.”

Abby looked up at him, her eyes shining with… gratitude? Or could it be more? Abe had said she was lonely, had she been lonely while he was away? Certainly she seemed glad to see him.

Joe moved to join them.

“I will dry, you can put things away, otherwise you may never find them again.” His brother smiled at his wife, and David had to rein in the red mist once again. Abe was right, Joe was only being friendly, and Abby needed friends.

Once the washing up was done and put away, David only waited until Abby had finished her evening chores, before announcing he was retiring to his bed. He’d had a while to discuss the cattle with his family, now he needed to be with his wife. He had wished for her company the whole time he had been away.

The rest of the menfolk retired to the bunkhouse and those in the house made ready for bed. When Abby snuggled close that night, he was in little doubt that she had missed him too.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Abby entered the kitchen dressed in the sea green party dress, put a wrap around her shoulders and pulled her old coat over the top. An extra layer was needed for the buggy ride, even though they would have blankets

She caught David staring at her, at first she thought he was pleased, but his words said otherwise.

"Do you have to wear that coat?"

She was taken aback. "It's cold, I only have the wrap, I thought…"

"Yes, of course. Come, the buggy is outside."

He handed her up onto the seat and they were away to the Social.

By the time they pulled up outside the church rooms, David had spoken barely a word to her. She had no idea what she might have done wrong, but he'd not been this silent since the first week of their marriage.

He handed her down from the buckboard and escorted her into the already busy party. She knew she looked her best, the new dress was beautiful and she loved the color, but that didn't give her any real confidence. She was fairly certain people would look at her, and talk behind their hands. Above all…

"David, what if Jeb Cornish is here?"

He looked down at her. "What if he is? That problem is behind you. I doubt he will be here, he will be in the Five Card Stud, or the old saloon, where there is drink to be had."

"Oh. Right." She felt foolish again. David seemed to have the knack of making her feel that way, she never felt quite good enough when they were in public.

Once inside the hall, a number of people greeted David. To Abby's relief Charis and Ben were already there, and David took her over to stand with them.

David was feeling annoyed, no *ashamed*. He'd bought her things, dresses and underwear, but he'd never asked her what she needed, and he'd never even thought about a coat. Why did he find it so hard to do the right thing? Ben never seemed in any doubt of how he should treat Charis, he always made the right choices, why could he not be more like his brother?

He mused over this for a while, and when a rancher from the other side of town approached, he got pulled into a conversation

about cattle breeding. Abby stood at his side, quietly listening to everything. Then the dancing started, and Joe came and whisked her away to dance with him. David watched her go, resentful that she left him so easily. The rancher regained his attention, and David concentrated on something he knew he understood.

Abby went to dance with Joe, partly because she was cold, and partly because she felt it was only polite. David had nodded his approval when she had asked to go, obviously it did not bother him.

To her surprise Mr. Carne was there. She had only met him briefly, when he had that meal at the ranch, but he hadn't seemed the type to hang around in a town like Jessop Creek. She'd expected him to be long gone, she'd imagined Laramie or Cheyenne would be more to his taste. He had reminded her very much of the men who used to visit the bordello.

After she had danced with two of the Fergusons' neighbors, Carne sidled up to her.

"Evening, Missus Ferguson, enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Carne."

"It's Paulie to you, little lady." She flashed him a small frown. "Now don't you look that way, I've heard about you from my friends. I don't think airs and graces suit you."

"Excuse me?" She glared and moved away towards the refreshment table.

To her relief he didn't follow.

A short while later Abby moved on from her chat with Mrs. Borthwick from the mercantile, to her dismay she found her path blocked by Carne once again.

"I can show you a better time than that husband. Your sort don't need a man like him." He glanced over to where David was talking. "I've been hearing about him from my friends, a girl in every town that one. He don't wanna be with you, does he? You want someone around when he's away bein' a big man buyin' cattle, and puttin' himself about."

Abby stared at him in horror. Was it that well known that David would be leaving her behind? A girl in every town? Who had been saying such things?

"What are you doing?" The voice at her shoulder startled her.

She looked up gratefully into the eyes of her husband, only to find those eyes were like flint. He caught her elbow and pulled her away.

"Leave my wife alone," he growled at Crane.

The man stared at him in disbelief. "Why are you bothered? I

thought she was a handy bit of fluff in between yore travels. Dunno what a big man like you needs with a dance hall doxy!"

"Well you thought wrong. Get lost before I knock your teeth out!" David snarled. Carne turned and melted into the crowd. David pushed her towards the door. "I think we need a talk."

For Abby, light had suddenly dawned where Carne was concerned. He'd heard about the way she and David had met, and assumed David had married her for the sake of appearances, to look a benevolent man. Therefore he believed she was a neglected woman. His words about 'her type' had stung, she was trying so hard to be something more. She allowed David to hustle her from the hall, he was right they needed to talk, and if this was the only chance, then she would take it.

"Abby!" A voice followed them as they moved away from the hall. Abby looked back to see Charis in pursuit. "Is everything all right?"

David paused and looked back as she returned in as calm a voice as she could manage, "It's fine Charis. Go away!"

Charis stopped and stared for a second. "If you need me…" she allowed the words to tail off as she turned back to the party.

"What does she think I'm gonna do? Rough you up? Strangle you even? Not that you wouldn't deserve it, cozyin' up to Carne that way."

Abby wrenched her arm from his grasp. "I *was not* cozying up to him. If you had bothered to notice, to take any interest in me at all tonight, you would have realized that was the second time he had tried to proposition me. I escaped him the first time, I was about to do the same again. For some reason he wouldn't take no for an answer. Maybe it was because you took so little notice that he believed I was wed to a man who doesn't want me."

David stared down at her in the gloom.

"Is that true?"

"That is what he said. And only you can know how little time you have spent by my side tonight."

"I… umm…" He hesitated, glancing about the snowy church yard before holding out his arm for her. "Do you want to go back inside, where it is warmer? Or will you come into the church with me?"

Abby considered for a second.

"Why the church?"

"It's out of the wind, and it's more private, although not very warm."

"The church," she agreed. It would appear he wanted to talk. It was long past time they sorted this out. If they were going to talk, she would tell him the truth, the whole truth, about her past.

The church was cold, but not pitch dark, candles burned near the altar.

“Are we alone?” she questioned.

“I believe so, the pastor was in the hall, but on nights like these he leaves the candles burning in case anyone wants to come in.”

“I don’t know what you want to say that needs privacy, but before you say anything at all, I have a confession to make, and it has nothing to do with Carne.” Abby took a steadying breath. She had not expected this to be so hard, she didn’t want him to think even worse of her than he already did. But she had to tell him, the truth would surely come out one day, then things would be even worse. “I lied to you about my past.”

“Go on.”

“I was not encouraging Carne, but he… he could see what I was, I guess that’s partly why he tried. My mother works in a bordello. She never had any choice, I was only a child when my father died, and she did what she had to do for us to survive. I became a mail-order bride to escape the same fate. I have spent the last ten years living and cleaning up in a bordello.”

“But not as a… working girl?”

“No, but I come from a whore house. I didn’t want to leave my mother, my only family, but she insisted I should go, to better myself.”

David was silent for such a long time Abby gave up.

“I will leave tomorrow.”

“Leave? What do you mean leave?”

“This isn’t working, you don’t need a girl like me about. Maybe the Five Card Stud would be an option, but I believe you would rather I traveled far away so no-one would know. All I need is a bit of money for my fare and I will be out of your hair.”

“Abby…”

“Not much, just enough for travel and a few meals, I can…”

“No.”

“But I have no money. I…”

“Stop! I’m not giving you money so you can run away from me. I know it’s been a bit difficult, I know I haven’t been… anything like a good husband so far, but I want to change that.”

“You… what?”

“Abby, I don’t want you to go. I want to try and make this work. I realize I’ve made a terrible hash of things, but I’m just… afraid.”

“Afraid?”

“I don’t know how to do this. I’m afraid of doing it wrong.”

Abby moved closer to him. “I don’t know how it should work either, but I think we need to talk more.”

“Yes, and I knew you came from that sort of background. When I first met you the dress was a bit of a clue. The way you fought back against Cornish, I knew you were no sheltered young miss.”

"So why did you marry me?"

"I took the chance that you were not… what you seemed at first. Obviously you wanted to change your life, as did I, so I took the chance we could do it together. I discovered I was right about your innocence, but… I am still finding the reality of marriage a bit tricky."

"The reality?"

"The fact that I am no longer free to do as I please, that I need to consider you too. I haven't made a good job of things."

Abby regarded him solemnly. He spoke the truth, but did the fact he realized his failings mean he could, and would change?

"I have tried, and you have not. Are you going to try? Are you going to stop treating me like I am invisible?"

"Yes. And I will start tonight. When we go back inside, will you dance with me instead of the other men?"

"Of course I will. The only reason I danced with anyone was because they are our neighbors in this town, I felt I should not be… standoffish."

"I don't… I can't…" He took a breath and started again. "I would prefer that you didn't dance with other men, not until people realize that you are mine, and mine alone!"

It was the first time he had given Abby any indication that he felt that way, he sounded… jealous. She stepped forward, stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek, as she'd wanted to do for days now. His reaction was everything she could ever have hoped for. He closed his arms around her and kissed her, properly.

By the time he released her she was floating somewhere in the clouds.

They returned to the hall, and for the rest of the evening he stayed at her side. They danced and they chatted both together, and with his friends and neighbors. Finally Abby felt a stirring of affection from him. This *was* going to work.

The next afternoon Zac Ferguson sat back from his Thanksgiving meal with a satisfied grunt.

"That was delicious, thank you, ladies. The apple pie was particularly good this year."

"You can thank Abby for that, it was all her work." Charis nodded at her father-in law.

"Was it now? Well done, girl," Zac growled.

David looked on in amazement. His father was rarely forward with his praise. He turned his eyes to his wife, who was blushing prettily. She filled his gaze, he found he couldn't drag his eyes from

her. He'd seen her physical beauty the first time he had laid eyes on her, but now he saw so much more. She was beautiful, and she was grateful, and Abe was absolutely right, she was lonely. She might not have said it, but the words she had spoken told of a loss he'd never considered, until she had talked of her mother last night. He had ridden away from his family, but hers had been far less of a choice, of course she felt alone.

He knew she was worried that what she had told him last night about her past would make a difference. It didn't, not in the way she feared. He admired her for getting away from such a life, for being strong enough to fight, and he pitied her mother for not having had any choice in how she survived.

It was long past time he accepted that *he* was the one who had chosen to marry, so he should not resist getting close to her. She was delightful; she was everything he could ever want in a wife. Was this love? Did he know what love really was? Could he say such words to her when he wasn't certain if *love* really existed?

Last night had been… different. Tonight he hoped it would be the same, he would try his very hardest to show her that she belonged with him. He was afraid of rejection, and too uncertain to speak, but he could *show* her that he wanted her to stay.

He glanced over at his father, there were things they must discuss if this marriage was to truly succeed. They needed a place of their own. It didn't need to be grand, but Abby needed to run her own household.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Early December saw several falls of snow, but nothing to cut them off from the town. No doubt that would occur, but they had high hopes of attending the Christmas Social and the seasonal church services.

David found the time to talk with his father and he agreed they should build a house a short way from the main ranch. He even rode out with his son to agree on a site. David sketched a plan of the layout, and wondered how to present the idea to Abby. Their relationship seemed to have settled. He was pretty certain she wanted to stay with him, but she'd never actually said it. In the church that day, when he had told her he wanted her to stay, she had merely agreed. She had kissed him, but she had never told him she wished to be with him, forever.

It was just over a week until Christmas when David begged a few hours off from work and rode into town. He wanted to get Christmas gifts for Abby. He'd given it some vague thought, knowing he ought to

get her a gift, but over the last few days he had realized he wanted to buy her something pretty. What she really *needed* was something very practical.

At the mercantile he discussed it with Mr. Borthwick and his wife. He bought both the practical and the pretty, and ordered her the new ring he had promised when they had married back in October. Nothing more had been said about that ring, and he wondered if the fact he'd not bought it, made her feel that he wasn't serious? No matter, it was now on the way, Mr. Borthwick assured him the ring would arrive in time for Christmas day. He rode home, well pleased with his shopping trip.

Abby saddled up Star to head out onto the range, despite the threat of more snow. Maybelle had gone on and on about a Christmas tree, and she wanted the men to go and find one. Abby was conscious that they were all pushed for time in this weather. If she could find a tree, all that was necessary was a ride out to collect it, no searching required. It seemed like a good solution.

She rode up into the hilly area where the pine trees reached down onto the cattle pasture, as she did so the snow began to fall, just a light dusting to add to what already lay in the gullies. Surely she could find a nice tree hiding in one of the small valleys? Then she would ask Joe to collect it. She pondered this for a second, and changed her mind. She would ask David to come with her and collect it. He had been so much more attentive lately, she was beginning to feel he did want her around, even though she suspected he was preparing to ride away after Christmas.

If only she could show him she was capable, maybe she could go with him? She didn't want to stay here, alone. She rode on, pondering the state of her marriage.

She moved across the grassland and into the edge of the trees, only to discover there were few smaller trees under the taller ones. She move on to the edge of the trees, and to her surprise, in small gully were a number of cattle.

Abby would never claim to know much about the cattle business, but she was learning, and she listened to everything when the men talked in the evenings. She knew they had moved most of the cattle closer to the ranch buildings. But these cattle were not grazing happily, they had been pushed into a bunch. She guessed there were around twenty animals and amongst them she could see three of the new animals which David had collected from Laramie a few weeks back.

She caught sight of a man on horseback on the far side of the gully, and she turned Star in that direction, wondering if David might be there too.

A voice called out behind her.

"Oi, whatcha doing, girl?"

A mounted man rode up through the trees behind her, a man she had never seen before.

He raised his voice and shouted. "Hey, Paulie, we've got company."

Paulie? Paulie Carne?

This man leered at her, and she recoiled in horror. She pulled Star away, but she was far too late, he shot after her and grabbed at the reins.

"Let go! Don't you dare."

"Oh, I dare, girlie. What you nosing about here for?"

In that second it dawned on her.

Thieves!

They were cattle thieves! And Paulie Carne was one of them.

Why had she not been more careful? Why had she not noticed sooner? If she had, she could have ridden home for help. A second later she discovered it had been too late long before she had been in a position to notice.

"What's going on here?" The man shouted over as he approached from the gulley.

"I've been following her, she came from over by the Ferguson place."

"Yep, I guess she did." He pulled up beside them. "She's David Ferguson's wife. Dear little Abigail!" His voice was mocking.

Abby recognized him; Jeb Cornish!

"What are you doing?" she stared at him, furious with this man who was supposedly David's friend. These cattle were David's legacy, his contribution to his home, and this man was *stealing* them.

"Doing? I would think that was obvious. Taking our share from someone who has far more than us."

"Because he has worked for it!" Abby spat.

"Ahh, hush your trap. Get off."

"What?"

"You heard," he snarled. "Get your fancy little butt off that pony."

"No."

Cornish jumped from his horse and strode over to grab her arm. "Off, now." She tried to fight him, but he hauled her to the ground. "Fancy a chance like this just landing in my lap. If I had the time, I would make you pay for makin' a fool of me."

"You got your money back, and some!" Abby retorted. "If you

hadn't lied…"

"Shut yore trap." He shook her, hard. "What are we gonna do with you, hey? Maybe you can come along and I will have a little fun."

"Let me go. If you don't…"

"If we don't, what? You think I'm scared of Ferguson and his brothers? By the time they find us… well… they won't find us, we'll be long gone."

"So let me go, I'll just hold you up."

"Naa, you will ride straight back and warn them."

Abby felt sick. He wasn't going to let her go. So was he going to kill her and hide her body? That way, by the time she was discovered they would indeed be long gone.

"If you kill me, David will never stop until he finds out who did it, nor will the rest of the family."

"I had heard they were a bunch of hard heads," the other man growled.

"Nah, we take her with us, and we'll dump her miles away, then she won't get the chance to bring them a'runnin'."

Abby was hardly thrilled at the idea, but a captive sounded far better than dead. Maybe she could escape? Sneak away in the night, or some such thing?

Cornish hauled her over to his horse, and tied her hands with a length of rawhide.

"Now get back on yore pony. Pete, you lead her and get behind them cattle to keep 'em moving. Let's get away from here as soon as we can."

He mounted up and cantered off.

"Get on."

Abby glared at the man called Pete. There wasn't much she could do, so she struggled aboard, it wasn't that easy with hands tied. Fear washed through her like a wave. Was she going to end up dead? Would Cornish take heed of her words? What if she was left tied up on some lonely hillside in this snow? Would David find her?

She needed to leave some evidence of her presence in the hope that someone might find it. The man leading her was bringing up the rear, Cornish and Carne were ahead, on either side of the cattle, so no-one was watching her. She groped in the pocket of her split skirt and found a handkerchief. Now she had to drop it somewhere that it would be noticed, if that was ever possible in this snow.

She eyed the surrounding hillside, the clouds were lowering and the sun was obscured, but she guessed it was past midday. She not intended to stay out for long, she had chores to do. She wondered how long it would be before she was missed. Surely they would come looking?

The cattle were pushed along the valley, she was bringing up the rear behind Pete. They were following a small trail, so this was as good a place as any to leave some sort of clue to her whereabouts. She worried at the kerchief with her teeth and managed to tear it, giving her two scraps to leave as evidence. She allowed the first fragment of cloth to fall to the ground and prayed it would be recognized for what it was. Please God it would not blow away, or be buried in the lightly drifting snow. It was very little, but what more could she do?

A light dusting of snow continued to drift down and she couldn't contain a shiver. Having her hands tied reduced the possibility of movement, and her hands were already icy cold, she tried to flex her fingers to warm them. She had gloves in her pocket, but she doubted Pete would stop and let her put them on. Then again, she could use them as scraps of evidence along the trail too.

They moved on until the sky began to darken, before setting up a crude camp beneath a few pine trees. To Abby's relief they lit a fire, and she was able to warm her hands a little. She had dropped both gloves along the trail, whether it would do any good, or whether she would have been better served by wearing the gloves she knew not, but she had to make some effort to tell her rescuers where she had gone.

There *would* be rescuers, surely?

"Here, girl."

Pete thrust a mug of coffee at her. She tried to hold it, but her cold hands, still tied, wouldn't close around the cup.

"Please, undo my hands. I can't feel them."

Pete put the mug down and reached for the knot.

"Whatcha doin'?" Cornish demanded.

"She can't use her hands."

"Serves her right."

"Please, untie me. I'm hardly going to run. I don't know where we are, and I doubt I could escape." Much though she hated to beg Jeb Cornish for anything, this could be life or death. He would pay for his sins, either God or the Fergusons would see to that.

"Hmmp." Cornish shrugged. "Do it." He turned back to pour himself more coffee.

After her bonds were removed Abby warmed her hands on the cup, sipping slowly to make it last. Warmth was as important as sustenance at this point. She couldn't remember ever being so cold in her life.

When the men prepared to sleep, she wondered if she should merely pretend; if she slept would she ever wake again in this cold? It was December, and Charis had told her this was one of the coldest months, certainly the temperature at night fell below freezing. The

snow was not melting away as it had when she first arrived here. Abby huddled by a rock and wondered if she would die tonight. To her amazement, Pete, the man who had been leading her pony, approached and handed her a blanket.

"Not much, but it might keep the cold off a bit."

She looked up at him in the firelight. "Thank you." She pulled the blanket around her and vowed she would survive. If determination could get her through this, she would live to fight another day, to go back to David.

David arrived back at the ranch before his brothers. He put Trooper in the barn and headed for the house with the large parcel under his arm. Hopefully he could hide it somewhere that Abby would not see it until he was ready to give it to her.

He mounted the steps into the house to find only Maybelle in the kitchen, she was banging pots around on the stove, and she seemed in a fair old temper.

"Where is Abby"

"How should I know?" Maybelle snapped. "She went out on the pony and left loaves rising and she never came back in time to cook them, they are ruined. And supper will be late too 'cos she wasn't here to start it."

Her snippy manner put David's back up in an instant. The woman claimed this was her domain, yet she expected Abby to do all the work. He had been musing about this place of their own, now he realized it had to be sooner rather than later.

"I don't suppose it occurred to you to do it?" David growled. "What time did she go out? Did she go to see Charis?"

"She went before noon, I have no idea where she went." Maybelle turned back to her supper preparations.

David stared at her in disbelief. She didn't know, and she didn't care either.

A new house. That was what Abby *really* needed for Christmas. He had permission to build, and they would begin as soon as the weather improved. Maybe even before he went traveling again?

That problem aside, where *was* Abby?

The only place she was likely to go was to visit Charis, or to town, and since he had just come from town, he was pretty certain she wasn't there.

David hurried up the steps to abandon his parcel before leaving to saddle his poor horse once more. As he covered the two miles to Ben and Charis' house he tried not to think the worst.

Had she had some sort of accident? Had Charis had some sort of accident, resulting in Abby not being able to leave her? Would he meet her walking home with a lame pony? Had she been thrown? He kept a good eye on the margins of the trail as he rode smartly along in the fading daylight. Snow was swirling down once again.

He rode his horse into the barn, knowing that Star should be there, but he was nowhere to be seen. He jumped off Trooper and ran to the house, taking the steps in one bound and charging through the door.

"Charis, where is Abby?"

Charis spun round with a small shriek. "David! Goodness me, you startled me. I thought it was Ben riding into the barn."

"Abby! Is she here?"

"Here? No, I've not seen her today, why…?"

"Because she's gone, she's not at home. Maybelle said she went out on the pony around midday."

"And she's not back yet? I know she likes to ride, but that's a long time, maybe she has a problem?"

"Of course she has! Something is wrong, she wouldn't just leave, she wouldn't… Would she?"

Charis plonked the pan she'd been holding back on the table. "David, it is past time you realized, Abby is not going to leave unless you actually drive her away. At first I thought she might go because you were not exactly helpful, you didn't let her know you wanted her here, but recently things have improved."

"Yes, I know. I… well, yes. So something is wrong isn't it?" He spun round to leave. "Tell Ben as soon as he gets home. I must tell the others, we must go out and look for her."

"I hope you find her, soon." Charis' words followed him as he closed the door and sprinted back to the barn. He had to get home, he had to get everyone out to look for her before it was fully dark.

He arrived home in time to find his brothers in the kitchen questioning Maybelle. Of course, they were all wondering why their supper wasn't ready.

"Hey, David, you brought the wayward wife back home?" Josh joked as he barged through the door.

"No. She's nowhere to be found."

"Not with Charis?" Abe questioned.

"No. If she was I would have found her, wouldn't I?" David returned belligerently. "She went riding, she must have fallen, or been run off with or something."

"That pony wouldn't run off," Abe declared. "So she's fallen." He glanced out the window. "I guess we'd better get out and find her."

"But I've nearly finished supper!" Maybelle complained.

“Keep it warm, girl,” Zac growled. “Let’s go, boys.”

David was first out of the door, thankful that his family, or most of them at least, were ready to search for her. Maybe she had been foolish, maybe she had just been unlucky, but at this time no-one was pointing fingers. All that mattered was finding her as soon as they were able.

They saddled up and congregated in the yard. David was in a fever to get moving, but Abe took charge.

“I know you want to charge off and look for her, brother, but we need to be sensible. Do you have any idea where she might have headed? You are certain she wasn’t along the track to Ben’s place?”

“No, I saw nothing.”

“So we spread out, David, go that way, Joe…”

“Abe, I have an idea,” Joe interrupted.

“What?” David almost yelled at his brother.

“Abby said something about looking for a Christmas tree. Maybelle had been on and on about it, maybe she…”

“Yes,” David turned towards the hills. “She won’t be on the range, she will be in the woods.” He urged Trooper into a lope and headed out of the yard.

“Come on, boys. I’m guessin’ he is right. Keep your eyes peeled.” Zac headed after his son.

They searched until it was as black as pitch. They could see nothing in the swirling snow. They had shouted themselves hoarse, but they’d found no sign of Abby or the pony.

David was doggedly searching the ground for any signs when Abe rode up to him.

“We are heading back. Come on, you are doing no good here. We will come back at first light.”

“No. You can’t expect me to leave her out here. Please Abe, we need to keep looking.”

“Yes we do, but we also need to rest, and rest the horses. We will head out before dawn, at first light we will start again from here.”

“But…”

“Brother, I can’t tell you what to do, but killin’ yourself out here in the snow ain’t gonna help your wife. Come home, eat, sleep and gather yourself.”

David stared at his brother through the darkness. He knew Abe was right, but he didn’t want to stop.

“I’ve failed her, Abe. I’ve failed her.”

“No, you have not. She’s not a silly girl, if she’s had an accident she will find some sort of shelter.”

“And if she’s lying somewhere, injured?”

Abe gave a sigh. “Tomorrow we bring the dogs. We should have

thought of it tonight, but tomorrow they will lead us to her."

"Dead or alive!" David retorted.

"Maybe so, brother. Maybe so." He turned and headed back towards the trail.

They returned home to eat the meal Maybelle had prepared. As far as David was concerned it could have been dust and ashes. He ate because both his brother and his father pushed him to do so, but it stuck in his throat. All he could think was that his beautiful wife was out there, alone, freezing, maybe dying, maybe already dead.

The others went to their beds, David spent the night in the chair by the fire, he could not lie in that bed he shared with Abby.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Abe was as good as his word, he roused everyone before dawn, and they headed out into the snowy world. The falling snow had ceased and as the sky greyed and the light grew, they arrived back at the place where they had abandoned their search the night before.

Abe's gamble proved correct, within a very few moments Joe shouted that he had found cattle tracks. Driven cattle, where there should be none. It may have nothing to do with Abby's disappearance, but the coincidence seemed too much to ignore. They followed the tracks.

Abby had dozed fitfully throughout the hours of darkness. She was hardly happy at her situation, but she was grateful to Pete for giving her a blanket and untying her hands. She was cold, as cold as she could ever remember feeling before, but she was still alive. If determination could get her through this, she would live to fight another day, to go back to David.

As dawn paled the sky, her captors made coffee and prepared to ride. Pete brought her coffee, she drank it gratefully.

By the time it was fully light they had saddled the horses.

"On you get, girl."

"What about her hands?" Carne questioned.

"Leave them," Pete suggested. "She's stayed quiet and caused no more trouble. Leave them untied."

"Hmmp, go and round up those cows, Carne." Cornish scowled at her. "You get on that pony and behave. If you try to run, you won't get far, I'm a good shot with a rifle." He turned to Pete, "Keep an eye on her. Let's go."

They'd been riding for little more than an hour when there was a shout from behind. Abby threw a look over her shoulder and saw riders approaching at speed. If she was not mistaken it was salvation. She could see Joe's paint pony, and Zac Ferguson's black, and, best of all, David's magnificent bay.

Seconds later the gunfire started, initiated by her captors. The cattle spooked and ran in all directions, there may have only been twenty animals, but it was enough to cause confusion. As the bullets began to fly in both directions, Abby took what she considered was the wisest course of action, she threw herself from the saddle to cower in the snowy bushes. Unfortunately for her she was not unseen.

It seemed only seconds later that Jeb Cornish was standing above her, pointing his gun at her. For a second she thought he was going to order her to get up and run as his captive. That was not to be, outnumbered and outgunned, he accepted he was beaten, but he was a vindictive man.

"If I cain't have ya, no Ferguson will!"

Abby saw his finger tighten on the trigger, and there was a sudden blast of sound. She cowered in the bushes, wondering why she'd felt nothing. She looked up again to see someone bearing down on her, she couldn't suppress a small scream as he crouched beside her.

"Abby, are you all right, sister? Did he hurt you? Did the bullet touch you at all?"

She stared in disbelief.

Abe Ferguson.

"Abe. He was…"

"I know what he was going to do. I shot him, and good riddance."

"He… he said if he couldn't have me, no Ferguson would," she stuttered, her teeth chattering with the cold.

"Sounds about his style." He stood again and shouted. "David. She's here. She's not hurt."

Abby could hear the approaching hoof beats, and there he was; her husband. He jumped off Trooper to crouch at her side. Abe moved away and rode off to help with the cattle.

"Abby, you are not hurt?"

"Cold." Her teeth wouldn't stop chattering.

"What happened? How did you end up here?"

He reached out to raise her to her feet, she leant on him, grateful for the support, wishing he would hold her and warm her.

"I… met them, and I was stupid. I should have left sooner. Then… I couldn't, he wouldn't let me," she stuttered.

"You… *met* them?" David's voice was harsh.

She nodded, confused at his tone.

"I see. Well, maybe we had better get back to the ranch. I'll catch your pony."

He walked off and left her standing alone, wondering at his attitude. He wasn't exactly sympathetic, not the way Abe had been. Did he think this was somehow her fault?

He returned to help her aboard Star.

"David, I didn't mean to cause trouble."

"Didn't you?" He handed her the reins. "Ride at the rear, that way you won't spook the cattle anymore." He walked back to his horse, swung aboard and cantered off.

Abby was left staring after him in confusion. Obviously he did blame her for this!

David joined his brothers and father, who had now subdued the remaining two thieves and rounded up the cattle.

Abe was issuing orders. It happened more frequently now, Zac was releasing the reins to his son and heir, which was only right. The only one who seemed to object at all was Josh. He hadn't said much, but David could feel the animosity, no doubt Maybelle had been working on him about the inheritance and Abe's lack of a wife.

"Josh and Joe, you head for town with those two and him," he indicated Jeb Cornish's body. "You can tell the Sheriff I shot him, he was about to shoot Abby, so he got what he had comin'." He turned to the others. "We need to head home with this lot, if we go back onto the proper trail we can be home a great deal faster. They wasted hours trying to hide in the hills. Good thing they did or they would have been miles away." He turned to address David. "Is she all right?"

"She'll do." David didn't feel like saying more. When they all realized she'd come out here to meet these men they would be furious. No doubt it would be curtains for them as a couple, certainly she would no longer be welcomed on the ranch. He would probably be ousted too. No matter, he would head back to Texas. As for Abby, well, she had made her bed, she would need to accept the consequences.

David noticed the puzzled look on Joe's face. He didn't understand why David was not comforting his wife, but he soon would, he would realize his friendship had been misplaced.

He turned and rode towards the cattle to move them forward towards the trail, and his father followed and stopped him.

"David, why are you not with your wife?"

"Because… because she came out here to meet them."

Zac looked back at her. "She did *what*? Are you certain?"

"She said she met them, and when she decided it was foolish, they wouldn't let her go back. You tell me what that means!" He rode away from his father, angry and embarrassed at what he had to admit. He had been all kinds of fool about that girl. His *wife*. What a joke!

He rode on in silence, they herded the cows and pushed them along at a good speed once they had left the gullies, they all wished to be home before nightfall. He couldn't help but be aware of Abby, trailing along behind, but he tried his very best to ignore her.

Maybe an hour had passed when Abe rode up to him.

"Why have you left her alone? What are you doing, brother?" Abe didn't waste time getting to the point.

David told him exactly what he had told his father. "She said she

met them, and then realized she'd been stupid but they wouldn't let her go back."

"Are you sure you heard her right? Her teeth were chattering so much it would be hardly surprising if you didn't. It was not the way she meant it!"

"What other way is there?" David snarled.

"David, you need to trust your wife, have you not considered that most likely she met them *by accident*? She happened on them, and couldn't get away. Jeb Cornish grabbed her when he saw the chance, he was about to shoot her so you couldn't have her back."

David glanced over at her, riding at the rear, hunched against the cold.

"How do I know she hasn't changed her tale now she's been caught?"

"Caught? Rescued more like. Look at the girl, why would she do such a thing? Have you given her a chance yet? Have you opened up to her, showed her any sort of trust? Have you stopped behaving like a stiff necked mule? Gals need a bit of tenderness, a bit of love." Abe whirled his horse and cantered away.

Love! What the blue blazes did Abe know of love for a girl?

Love.

Was that what gnawed at him every time he thought of her? That feeling that he was missing something? That feeling which had assailed him every time some man had spoken with her, even looked at her, at the Social the other night? Love. Was that why he'd felt so desperate when he'd found she had not come home?

He *loved* her?

He knew he wanted her, and he needed her beside him, but love, was that love? Did it matter if it was or not, if it was enough?

If this was love, it hurt. Maybe he had known it since that very first day? Certainly he'd known he felt differently about her than he ever had any other girl, but he'd never known what to *do* about it.

He glanced back at her. She looked so unhappy. Was Abe right? Had he been too quick to jump to a conclusion? Had he caused her misery, or had she been unhappy before he accused her of betrayal?

The further they rode, the more he doubted his thoughts. Surely she would never have come out here to meet those men? Abby might be a strong young woman, but she was no fool, and to do such a thing *would* have been foolish. Abe must be right, he had misunderstood, he had wronged her yet again.

He glanced back at her, she was playing her part, herding the cattle, bringing up the rear as he had told her to do.

He wanted to go back, to tell her he was sorry, to help her. But had he pushed this too far? Would she ever forgive him for such an

accusation? He carried on riding at the flank, too shamefaced to confront her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The day wore on, Abby clung doggedly to the saddle, so cold she couldn't feel her feet. She tried to push Star along, to do her part in herding the cows, it was the only thing that was keeping the blood flowing around her body. Her tears had long since dried, frozen on her icy cheeks. There was no point in tears, no point in trying, no point in hanging on really. Maybe she should just quietly slip off the pony and lie down to sleep in the snow? No-one would care. They thought she had gone out to meet, and possibly help, cattle thieves. Would anyone ever listen to her now David was so convinced she was guilty?

Finally the house appeared through the mist. The sun had passed its zenith and everyone was cold, tired and hungry. At least, Abby presumed so. She was riding in a miserable daze, so cold it seem like a nightmare. There was little doubt in her mind that Hell was not hot, it was cold, icy cold.

The men herded the cattle towards the pasture, and Abe rode over to speak with her as she reached the barn.

"Off you get, run to the house, I'll deal with the pony."

Abby stared mutely at him, and did as she was told. She slid off, and her legs all but refused to hold her. She abandoned Star and hobbled as best she could to the house. Charis had seen them arrive, and she was out to meet her in a flash.

She was in the house, her coat stripped off and a blanket around her shoulders in only minutes. Charis sat her by the fire and handed her a cup of coffee.

"Not too hot, plenty of cream and sugar, drink it up, it will warm you."

Maybelle too seemed sympathetic, but Abby knew it wouldn't last for long, not when the men came in and put their view of things forward.

"What happened, Abby? What about the cattle? Why were you with them? Were they straying and you tried to bring them home?" Maybelle was not slow to ask the questions. If only Abby could claim that last one was the truth.

"I went to find a Christmas tree, I saw the cattle in a valley, I went to see, I thought maybe David was with them, but it wasn't him, it was thieves, and they caught me."

"Why were you out near the cattle?"

"Yes!" Zac echoed Maybelle's words as he stepped through the door. "David said you met them. Did you arrange this?"

"No!" Abby dissolved into tears. "No, of course I didn't. I met

them by accident. I was too foolish to run the second I saw them, I didn't realize it wasn't the boys collecting strays. After they grabbed me they forced me to ride with them, tied my hands and led my pony. Later, I didn't dare run away, I had no idea where I was, no idea of the way home, with the snow and the dark and…" tears overtook her completely.

"Hmmp, is this true?" Zac growled.

David stomped past him. "Of course it's true!"

Zac looked at his son, "You said…"

"I was wrong." He stepped to the fireside and scooped her out of the chair and into his arms. "Come on, we are going upstairs. You need to go to bed and get some rest."

"But David, she's had nothing to eat," Charis protested.

"She can eat later, when she's a bit warmer." He headed for the steps. When he got to the bottom he slid her feet down to the bottom rung. "Come on, I'll help you up."

Abby clung to the rail and forced her cold limbs to climb the steps, the tears were still coursing down her face as he helped her every step of the way. She couldn't believe he was being so considerate, surely he had believed her guilty of betrayal? The way he had reacted out there on the range she had been sure he had believed the worst.

He steered her into the attic room and closed the door firmly behind him, seconds later his fingers were busy on her buttons.

"Come on, let's get these wet clothes off. You can put on your nightdress and get under the covers."

"David…"

"Hurry up before you catch your death of cold, it's not warm in here."

That was true, the chimney ran through the room, and the heat rose from below, but it was not the same as having a fire.

"David, you do believe me? You didn't when I first spoke to you. You thought…"

"I wasn't listening properly. Abe was right. I was so desperate to find you, and then you said… you said you had met them, and I jumped to conclusions."

"But why? Why would you imagine I would do such a thing?"

"Because… because I don't know if you are happy here, if you want to stay. I said you could leave if it didn't work out, and I don't know what you think about the way things are at this time."

"I don't want to go. Where would I go? This is the closest to home I have had for a long time."

"Closest, but still not really home, is it?"

She looked up at him, she so badly wanted to deny those words,

but it was true, she wanted her home to be here, with him, but at this moment it still didn't feel as if she belonged. She shivered in the cold air.

"Come on now, no more talking until you are out of these wet clothes."

He slipped the shirt from her shoulders. It was the first time he had undressed her, and he seemed well practiced at unfastening women's buttons. She felt a wave of jealously streak through her. Had he done this often? Was he a womanizer? If he had been, would he continue that way?

"You are good at that," she murmured.

"Good at…? Oh. Well." He gave a dismissive shrug. "It's what single men do when they have no home, when they are alone. I'm not alone now."

"And you are home?"

"I have you," he contradicted. "Home is relative. This was home, if it is not where you will be happy, maybe our home will be somewhere else."

Abby stared at him. He snagged her nightdress from the bed before reaching for the hem of her chemise and pulling it over her head. She gave a squeak of protest and tried to cover herself with her hands. He pulled the nightdress over her head.

"Arms," he ordered.

Abby obliged and he pulled the nightdress down over her body.

"Now, into bed." He pulled back the covers and steered her beneath them.

Then he perched on the side of the bed.

"Abby, we need to talk. First, tell me exactly what happened today, so I can assure the others you had nothing to do with this attempted theft."

"Of course I didn't." She was still shivering and her voice wobbled.

"No, I have realized that now. I am sorry I doubted you, will you forgive me?"

"Of course."

He moved closer and pulled her against him and she snuggled into his warmth. He was always so strong, so warm and it felt so right in his arms. She felt the rightness of it; did he?

"Tell me," he urged.

"I rode out to find a Christmas tree because Maybelle kept on and on and… I've never had a Christmas tree before. She wanted one of you boys to get it for her, but I knew you were busy and I wanted to help. I took Star over the ridge, through the trees, and I saw the cattle. I knew they shouldn't be there, so I went to look, I should have come

back there and then and found one of you. Then I saw a rider, and thought it was one of you boys, of course I was wrong, and one of them came up behind me. Then Jeb Cornish arrived. He wanted to get his own back for the way I treated him, and he wanted his share of what he called your family's 'good fortune'. I told him he should work for things, he didn't much like that."

"I don't suppose he did." David hugged her close. "I am sorry I thought badly of you."

"I was so scared when I was with them and then you came and I didn't tell you properly. I thought… I was afraid… I thought you might send me away," she wailed and buried her head in his shoulder to sob once more.

This time he didn't try to stem her tears, instead he held her and let her cry.

"You were not the only one who was afraid," he admitted when her tears had subsided.

"What?"

"I was terrified we wouldn't find you, that you were dead in a snow drift. Then we came across the cattle trail, and I thought you might have been killed by the thieves. I still thought you would be dead in a snowdrift. When I found you were alive, I… I over reacted. I was so glad, and then you said you *met* them, and I thought… well, you know what I thought. I'm sorry, Abby."

"I would never betray you like that, you have to believe me."

He snuggled her close. "You are so cold, let me get in beside you and warm you." He pulled off his still damp outer clothes before sliding beneath the covers and gathering her close again. Abby burrowed against his warm body.

"Why are you warm and I'm so cold?"

"Because I was moving about more."

"Why are you here when you must be hungry?"

"I am hungry," he admitted, "But at the moment, this is far more important. When did you last eat?"

"Properly? Breakfast, yesterday," she murmured.

"As soon as you are warmer I will go and get you some food."

"I don't know if I could eat, I'm so tired."

"Then I will feed you, if you don't eat and drink, and get warm, you may be ill."

"All right," Abby murmured. She reached up to stroke his face. "Thank you for forgiving me, for saving me."

"Sweetheart, hush." He caught her icy fingers and tucked her hand back beneath the covers, between their bodies. "Rest and get warm."

She closed her eyes and drifted away.

David watched her as she drifted into sleep. Hopefully she would not suffer for this. People died from the cold out here. Maybe it wasn't the coldest it would get, but she wasn't used to the cold at all, she would find it so much worse.

He was tired to the bone, but sleep wouldn't come since he was so hungry. Abby seemed to be beyond the hunger.

He hugged her close, trying to surround her in his warmth, in his love.

When he had come into the kitchen he had intended to talk to her, there and then, in front of the others, but the sight of her in that chair, so woebegone, had affected him far more than he would have expected. He'd always considered himself a strong man, not one who was swayed by tears, not particularly warm and loving, but at that second he had realized the truth. There was no point in trying to hold back from Abby, afraid she might control him through his emotions, because he was way past that right now. He loved her, totally, and he would forgive her anything.

He had accused her of betrayal without thinking, it had been foolish. He so much wanted acceptance from his family that he had jumped to a conclusion. Once again Abe was right, as soon as he had pushed away the anger, he had seen the truth. Now he had to make it up to her.

It was some considerable time later when there was a knock at the door. Not wishing to disturb her, he called out.

"Come in."

Of all the people who could be on the other side, Ben was the last he had expected.

"Hello Ben, what are you doing here?"

"I rode back with Josh and Joe. It was a pretty fair bet that, things being what they were, Charis would be here, not at home, and I was right. How is she?"

"Sleeping, she's still not really warm."

Ben came into the room. "I thought you might want to know about the men we have in jail? Josh said something about Abby being mixed up with them, but it's not true."

"I know that, I was stupid to think she was, I heard the words and jumped to conclusions. They grabbed her." He looked down at her, sleeping so close against him. "I should have helped her on the way home. If she falls ill because of this, it will all be my fault."

"David, stop it. Not everything is down to you. Ever since you were a child you've been this way, why do you always have to be the

one who believes he is to blame?"

"Because… I was."

"Only because you always tried to be top dog." Ben perched on the side of the bed. "Ever since you've been a boy you have tried to impress people, more often than not it failed, and you set many against you because of it. They thought you inconsiderate, a braggart. But it's not true, I've always known it was not true, as has Pa, and Abe. The others… I'm not so sure."

"I'm pretty sure Joe hates me."

"And it would not be without cause. Ben shrugged.
"I think you are wrong. Joe is the most forgiving of any of us. So, how are you going to get past this problem?"

"Problem?"

"Abby and Maybelle and the house and everything. It won't work, you must see that."

David sighed, he felt her nestled closer as he did so, it warmed his heart. "I do know. We need our own place. I have asked Pa if we could build a small house, like yours, a mile or two away. That way Abby could have her own place, but still have company while I'm away."

"Away?" Ben's voice sharpened.

"If I'm going to make a go of this cattle improvement business, I need to travel, to visit, to make connections. I have plans."

"And leave Abby behind?"

"I doubt she would want to traipse all over the country, it's hardly a glamorous life." As he said it he felt a cold sinking in his belly, a regret at the idea of leaving her behind.

"Nor is being stuck here alone! I think it's a dreadful idea, and I wouldn't be surprised if Abby thought the same. I thought you had decided this marriage was a good thing?"

"I have, it is, but…"

"But nothing, you need to think again. You are married, and that should change your plans. Now, food is ready, do you want me to bring yours up here? And some for Abby too?"

"I… yes, bring it up here." David confirmed. At this second he didn't want to face all the others. If Ben was to make some comment about his going away, he had no idea how his father would react. But that was the way it had to be, wasn't it?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Abby awoke to find she was alone. It seemed to be daylight, so she had slept all night?

She remembered David feeding her, treating her so gently. She had been too tired to really appreciate it, but she could remember. His arms had been warm and comforting, she had felt like she finally belonged there.

This morning she felt dreadful, although she had plenty of covers, she felt cold, deep inside. She moved to sit on the side of the bed, if she went downstairs and sat by the fire maybe she would warm up. When she went to stand the world tipped around her, and she sat back down before she fell.

This was not good, how would she ever get down the ladder? But she must, Maybelle would not appreciate having to do all the work.

She stood again and reached for her clothes, but the world swam around her. She sank back to the bed, she felt so tired.

A few moments later she heard someone mounting the steps. The thought flashed through her head that it was David, but seconds later there was a tap on the door.

"Abby, are you awake?"

Charis.

"Yes," Abby could barely raise her voice above a whisper.

Charis poked her head around the door. "Oh good, you are awake, I wasn't sure if I heard you. I think you should get back into bed and I will bring you some breakfast. Unless of course you need to… do the necessary?"

Abby stared at her for a second, her heart fell to her boots at the idea of having to head to the outhouse. This house wasn't small, but it had been built forty years ago, it didn't have indoor facilities.

"I… um. I suppose I need to go out." She tried to stand again, and wobbled precariously. Charis was at her side in seconds.

"Oh no you don't. That is what a chamber pot is for."

"But… I *can't*!"

"You can. You need to spend a day or two getting your strength back, and bed sounds like a good idea to me."

"But…"

"Use it."

With Charis' help she did as she was told.

"Now, back into bed." Charis slid an arm around her waist, pulled back the covers and pushed her back into the bed.

"What about the work, the cooking." Abby whispered.

"I will see to it. I am staying here until you are fit again, to look after you and keep Maybelle on the straight and narrow. There is a lot to do for Christmas, unfortunately Maybelle will concentrate on the details, not the big things."

Abby lay back in the bed, worrying. "But everyone will think I am not doing as I should."

"In what way? You have had a very nasty experience, you could have died out there, either at the hands of the thieves or from the cold. You need to rest. It will only be for a day or two and you have done more than your fair share of housework and cooking over the last few weeks. Maybelle wants to be the lady of the house, it is a pity she doesn't do the work to earn that position! It was just the same when I first came here, she would leave it to me. After I left she had to pull her socks up. I did help her with her cooking, she was pretty clueless."

"Why is she so bad? Did her mother never teach her?" Abby murmured.

Charis sighed. "Mrs. Prescott was as spoiled as her daughter. She had servants and maids and cooks all her life. Apparently when she moved here with Maybelle's father she continued in the same way. But after Maybelle was born she moved back to St. Louis, taking Maybelle with her. When Mrs. Prescott died, Maybelle came back to live with her father and her uncle. She actually loved the ranch, but she wanted to run it, to be a cowboy and to be in charge of the whole operation. She had no experience and no interest in the domestic side of things. She was around fifteen when she returned, she met Josh and they fell in love. The rest, as they say, is history." She reached to adjust Abby's pillows. "I believe she is difficult because she feels she is lacking, she feels threatened by capable women, and afraid she will appear inadequate."

Abby stared at her in disbelief. "Maybelle! She feels *threatened*? By the likes of *me*?"

"You are a very capable young woman. You have certainly tamed David, the wild one."

"Tamed….?" Abby shook her head again. "David is not… I haven't… I don't know what you mean."

"David was headed down a dark road when he left here."

"But any changes he has made are nothing to do with me, I've only just met him."

"Maybe so, but he is changing, his attitude has changed in the few weeks you have been with him. He used to be a selfish brute, I see far less of that now."

"He's not a brute," Abby protested.

"Maybe not to you, and maybe not so much now, but I assure you,

he was!"

"But…"

"Hush, Abby. You need to rest. Lie back and I will bring you some food and a warm drink. Would that be nice?"

Abby relaxed into the pillows. "Yes, it would. I am a bit cold."

"So, hot drink and maybe even a hot stone for your feet. I will be back in a few moments."

Charis whisked out of the door, taking the offending chamber pot with her.

For the rest of the day Abby lay abed, waited on by Charis. She slept fitfully and was offered food and drink frequently. All there was to do was lie and brood, Charis would not allow her to get up.

She lay and wondered about her life, about her marriage, about this ranch and where she and David might end up. She needed to write to her mother again. Twice she had written, telling her of the marriage, and the way things had changed. She had hoped to ask her mother to join her, but not yet, not until she felt settled. Until she felt real acceptance, she could hardly expect this family, now her family, to accept yet another incomer.

Charis entered with yet another warm drink and a cookie. Abby pushed herself up to sit against the pillows.

"How are you feeling?"

"Still a bit feeble, but I am warmer. The hot bricks have helped." She patted the bed. "Please, Charis, I am so bored, sit and talk a while."

"You shouldn't be bored, you should be sleeping," Charis admonished with a smile.

"I think I am all slept out for a while, please, I need to ask you a few things."

Chairs sat on the bed. "Fire ahead, I'm not in any rush, I was only threading popcorn for the Christmas tree."

"There is a tree?" Abby was instantly alert. "I went to look for one, but I didn't really know what was necessary, how big and such. I've never seen a real Christmas tree, inside a house."

"Be in no doubt, with Maybelle's influence, that is not something you would miss in this house. Josh picked one out yesterday, he will bring it home tonight. Tomorrow I think you will be up and about and you can help to decorate it."

"Sounds like it is Maybelle's tree, will she allow me to decorate?"

"Probably, if you follow her instructions," Charis returned with a small laugh.

“Why, since Josh is not the heir, does she believe it to be her house-hold?”

Charis shrugged. “No-one has ever challenged her. Abe says he won’t marry, so she believes it will be hers one day. Could be she is right, because I don’t believe Adam, the second son, will return. He is happily settled in his own place, with a family on the way.” She adjusted Abby’s pillows. “Do you want anything more to eat or drink before you sleep again?”

“No, but I will need the chamber pot. The amount of drinks you keep pouring down me, there is no escaping that!”

Charis laughed again, a sound of pure amusement. “I am glad to hear you have regained your sense of humor. I’m also glad I will be able to give David the good news when he comes in. He is very worried about you.”

“He is?” Abby had hoped to hear that, she had rather hoped he would come in and see her at some point today, but he had not appeared.

“Yes, he has already been in twice.”

“But…? I never…?”

“No, you were asleep both times, and he wouldn’t wake you. He did, however, kiss you both times.” Charis gave a satisfied smile. “I would never have expected it, but he really does have a heart, and he loves you.”

She took her leave, and Abby lay back to consider what she had just discovered. Charis believed David loved her. Certainly he’d never said anything like that to her, but he’d been so kind to her last night, *after* he had been so nasty. Did he really love her, or was he trying to mend bridges after he had accused her unjustly?

At some point in her musings she fell asleep, again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The following morning Abby wasn't up early, but when she was woken by her husband leaving the bed, she insisted she could get up too. The smell of breakfast wafted up from below.

"David, I am fine. I am also hungry. I want to go down and eat my breakfast with everyone else. You can't expect Charis to keep on doing the cooking."

"Maybelle should be doing the cooking!"

"We both know that is unlikely." Abby moved to select the brown dress David had bought only a few weeks ago. She pulled it on and turned to see him watching her. "Honestly, I promise I will not overdo things, I will stay inside by the fire."

"All right." He cocked his head to study her. "I said that dress was plain, but you make it look pretty." He turned and left the room.

Compliments? She'd always known he thought she was pretty, he had told her that on the day they met, but he wasn't given to praising his fellow man, or woman. He must be feeling really contrite about the way he had treated her.

She descended to eat a good breakfast. When she rose to wash the pots, Charis ordered her back to her seat.

"Maybelle and I will do this today, there will be plenty of pots to wash over the next few days, you will need to regain your strength to do it all," Charis declared with a big smile. "Today you can concentrate on helping us plan the Christmas meal, and make decorations for the tree. Abe has said we will get it indoors later today."

"I've never made decorations," Abby admitted, "and I've never seen a real Christmas tree."

"Never?" Maybelle squeaked.

"No, I've never had a real Christmas meal either."

Maybelle stared at her in disbelief. "And presents?"

"My mother gave me presents, just small things when she could afford it, but there was never much, not after my father died."

Charis plonked the bowl of popcorn and the berries in front of her. "Here we are. Apparently it's a big tree, we will need plenty of popcorn strings. While you are doing that I will bake some gingerbread cookies to hang on the tree."

"What shapes?" Maybelle questioned eagerly.

"Stars, and bells, what else?"

"What about the ox and the ass, and the shepherds and the wise men?"

Charis raised her eyebrows and shot a look at Abby. “Didn’t I tell you Maybelle excels at the details?”

The remainder of the day was spent making decorations, while planning the Christmas feast.

The men came in for a spot of lunch and David immediately sat at her side.

“How do you feel? You are not overdoing things?”

“I am fine, I am sitting down and I am enjoying making decorations. We will soon have the tree looking beautiful.”

“Good. I hope you will feel strong enough for church and the Christmas social?”

“Of course I will, I have another night and a day to recover.”

The next day they finished their decorations, and Abby made gingerbread and Christmas biscuits to take to the social. To her surprise Maybelle helped her, it seemed she far preferred baking fripperies than preparing hearty meals.

As the afternoon arrived, the women packed up their offerings for the social, before putting on their best clothes to head into town.

Once again Abby was wearing her sea-green dress. Maybelle had helped to fix her hair, and she was well pleased with her appearance. There was no mirror in the attic room she occupied with David, but Maybelle had insisted she sat before Maybelle’s own mirror. Abby was glad their relationship appeared to be warming. They would never be best friends, the way she was becoming with Charis, but it was nice that they could get along.

She moved into the main room, to encounter David descending from their room. Under his arm was a large parcel.

“Ahh, there you are. Ready to go?”

“I am.” Abby pulled her wrap around her shoulders and reached for that old coat.

“No, not that.” David caught her hand. “I know it’s a little early, but I think you should open this. Happy Christmas, Abby.” He pushed the parcel into her hands.

“I… Oh. I’m sorry, David, I haven’t bought you anything.”

“No matter. Open it.”

Abby sat down by the fire and ripped off the paper. Inside was a beautiful coat, a blue so dark it was almost black.

“Oh. Oh David, this is beautiful.” She rubbed her face on the material. “It’s so soft and warm.” She stood and shook it out, it wasn’t just soft, it was also heavy.

“I think it should keep out the cold. Here, let me help you put it

on." David reached out to take it from her. She turned and allowed him to slide it over her shoulders. It was the most beautiful garment she had ever owned, better even than the dresses he had bought for her.

"Oh David, it's so beautiful. It's perfect. It fits me exactly."

"Good. I have to admit to having had help at the mercantile." He smiled as she twirled around. "Try the pockets."

She did as he asked, and discovered a small package in one pocket and a piece of paper in the other.

"Open it," he urged again.

She opened the package to find a box containing a pair of sparkling drop earrings.

"Oh David, thank you, thank you so much."

"I realize they are not the same as the ones your mother gave you, but I hoped they might be a nice replacement."

Abby looked at the earrings. They were too large to be precious stones, even she could see that, but she guessed they were semi-precious, they were certainly not glass or paste. They were far more valuable than the cheap trinkets her mother had handed her as keepsakes. She still regretted the loss of her mother's earrings, but these were beautiful.

"Thank you, David. They are beautiful. I must wear them tonight."

"Of course you must. Here, let me put them on for you."

He moved close and carefully attached them to her earlobes. Abby stood quietly, absorbing his presence, the scent of him, the strength and warmth.

Her husband. She loved him, no matter that he was sometimes off-hand and thoughtless. He was trying, and he was getting better at this job. She closed her arms around him after he had attached the earrings, and he dropped his arms around her to hug her back.

"What about the paper? Look at that too."

She smiled up at him and stepped back slightly to open the folded sheet still in her hand. It was a drawing, nothing professional, but a sketch of a house, and a floor plan too.

She looked up at him, questioningly.

"This will be our house. Pa has agreed we can build it a mile or so out from the main buildings. It will be close enough for you to walk to the big house when you want, so you can have company. I hope we can start in the spring."

Abby stared at the plan.

"If there is anything you want to change about it, or add to it, we can do it exactly as you want."

Exactly as she wanted. It was lovely to hear, but what she really wanted to know was if she would be living there alone for many

months of the year. If that was the case, the idea of the house was less exciting than it would otherwise have been.

"David, you have been so good to me, I'm sorry I have nothing to offer in return. This coat is wonderful. And the earrings, they are beautiful, and so much better than I have ever owned." She hugged him again, and he closed his arms about her. She felt right in his arms.

"What about the house?"

"Well, that is wonderful too, of course it is."

"Is it? You don't sound like it really is. Would you prefer to stay in the big house?"

"No, no of course not. A home of… of our own. Isn't that what every girl wants?"

"I thought so, now I'm not so sure." He looked down at her with a rueful smile. "Be honest, Abby, is it what you want?"

"Are you going to share it with me?"

He stared at her, seemingly astounded by the question.

"Well, I had plans to travel, to work, but I will come back."

"How often?"

"When I can."

She couldn't answer that. Instead she pulled away. "I guess it's time we got moving to the Social."

David followed her from the room and they mounted the buggy with no more discussion.

A house. It played on her mind all of that evening, while they were in the church, and after, when she was laughing and dancing in the church rooms. The idea lurked in her brain, making her sad. A house, where she would stay and build a home, while he traveled and did … what exactly? Worked, yes, but what else? Was there another woman waiting for him somewhere? Was that why he wanted to go?

He had never said he cared. Oh she knew he *cared*, he didn't hate her, in fact he seemed to rather like her company in his bed at night. But he had never claimed to love her, not the way she loved him.

Should she tell him?

Would it make one bit of difference?

The evening drew to a close and people began to make their goodbyes.

"Home to bed," Charis murmured. "I have to admit, I'm not sorry. It's been a lovely evening, but I feel very tired."

"Because of your condition?" Abby asked softly. "Ben did seem to be twirling you around rather a lot. I am guessing you haven't told him?"

"No, but I will, maybe tonight, or maybe first thing in the morning, before we come over to the big house for lunch. I thought it would be a bit of a Christmas present."

"Oh it will be!" Abby accepted her coat from David, who helped her on with it. "See," she twirled before Charis. "I already have my present, isn't it beautiful."

"It certainly is, but I thought you had earrings?"

"Those too," Abby smiled at David. "I have a very generous husband."

Charis gave a little snort, and Abby rounded on her. But to her surprise David was smiling.

"You see Charis, I am not as black as you would try to paint me."

She gave a nod. "Oh, I can see that is true, and I am very happy for you. I can safely say I am now proud to call you my brother." She stepped closer and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Happy Christmas, David. We will see you tomorrow." She followed Ben out of the hall.

Abby regarded her husband. He was looking slightly stunned, fingers touching his cheek where Charis had kissed him.

"Well! Never did I expect her to mellow like that!" He glanced at her, and reached for her hand, to slip it through his arm. "Don't look so concerned. I admire Charis, but she was never the woman for me. We would have fought like a couple of roosters penned in the henhouse." He escorted her from the hall and headed for the small buggy they had brought.

Abby put her hand in her pocket, and encountered the paper David had given her before they left. She made a decision, she must tell him, now, before this house caused friction between them. He had looked hurt when she had not seemed thrilled, and she had to explain her feelings.

David moved to help her aboard the buggy.

"Wait, please. There is something I need to say."

He turned towards her in the lamp light. She took the paper from her pocket and held it out to him. He took it, she could see the crestfallen look on his face. Light suddenly dawned for Abby. All these weeks she had loved him, but there were certainly times when she hadn't *liked* him. Was he so difficult, and sometimes distant, because he felt inadequate? Did he truly see himself as a loser? Certainly, when he was with his family he was never as nice as he was when he was alone. Did he see her rejection of the house as some sort of failure?

That decided her completely.

"David, the house would be beautiful, it *will* be beautiful, I would love it, but not yet." She took a measured breath. "You want to travel. To Texas, and California and Oregon, and all the other places you

have talked about."

"Well, yes, but…"

"While I stay here alone? In my lovely new house?" she questioned. "I don't want that. I love you David, please don't leave me behind."

"You… you *love* me?"

"Yes, and I want to come with you. There will be time to stop and build this house later; maybe there will be children and you will want to settle with them."

"You love me? Honestly?"

"Yes, I love you."

He let out a big sigh, "Abby, I think I have loved you since the day I met you, I just never thought… Children?" He laughed. "Wouldn't that be something? Maybe being a father is something I really *can* be good at?"

"David, you shouldn't put yourself down. You don't have to excel at anything, because you are good at *everything*. And I hope I can live up to what you need in a wife."

He swamped her in a hug and kissed her soundly, oblivious to the other townsfolk who were still leaving the church rooms.

"Come on, wife, let's go home, tomorrow is Christmas Day."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Abby was woken by David sitting up in bed.

"What was that?"

"What was what?" she murmured sleepily.

There was a thud against the window.

"That!" David leapt from their bed, stark naked, and looked out the window. He chuckled and pushed the casement open.

"David, you will freeze. What is it?"

"It's Joe, come and look."

Abby followed him, grabbing her robe as she went, it was cold and she wasn't half as tough as her daft husband. At the window, he enfolded her in his arms. It was grey dawn, and streaks of lemon and pink were staining the sky in the east. The world was… white.

"Oh. Oh my," Abby gasped.

In the yard below Joe held another snowball in his hand. The snow reached halfway up his thighs.

"Wake up, slug-a-bed. Time you were out here helping with the chores."

"I'll be there shortly," David assured his brother, and pulled the window closed to keep the warmth in.

"I've never seen snow like that," Abby murmured in awe.

"That's the way it is in Wyoming. We will get more, we may have drifts five feet deep when it blows." He hugged her tight. "Thank the good Lord that it didn't snow like this a few days ago. If it had we would never have found you."

"Or the cattle."

"Hang the cattle! You are what matters. If I was to lose you now, I don't know what I would do." He kissed her gently. "Now I know you want to come with me, I don't want to leave your side for even a day."

"Since I'm coming with you, that won't ever be necessary."

"Good. Now I must get out there, and you can either start the breakfast, or go back to bed."

Abby snorted derisively. "You know as well as I do that if I don't start breakfast, there won't be any, cos Maybelle won't be up and about yet."

"True." He released her and grabbed his clothes from the chair, pulling them on a lightning speed. "Come on, either get back in that bed, or get dressed and go and stoke the fire. No-one will be hanging around this morning, they will soon be back in for coffee and a bite to eat."

Abby dressed swiftly. By the time she descended the steps her

husband was long gone into that snowy world to help his brothers.

She stoked the fire, put the kettle on to boil and began to prepare the breakfast. As usual the smell of baking finally roused Maybelle from her bed.

"Oh heavens, its Christmas day and the smell of baking still makes me feel ill. How will I manage?" Maybelle's mournful face certainly didn't bode well for a merry Christmas.

Abby made her a cup of weak tea and put a piece of just baked biscuit on the plate in front of her.

"Eat and drink, you know it will make you feel better. Think Maybelle, next year will be the first Christmas for your little one."

That seemed to raise her spirits, she ate her small breakfast and moved to help Abby as the men came in for coffee.

"There will be no church today, the snow is deep, and despite the sun, I believe it will snow again soon. Joe is taking the sleigh to collect Ben and Charis." Abe picked up his coffee. "Abby, I believe David wants you to go out on the horse with him for a while."

"But we have so much to do for lunch."

"We would have left it all to go to church. Think of it as your 'church trip', sister," Abe returned with a smile.

"You have been working for days," Zac growled. "Put the vegetables on the table, we fellas are quite capable of chopping vegetables for an hour or so."

"I…Oh."

David entered the kitchen rubbing his hands together. "Abby, when I've drunk my coffee, get your coat on, we are going out for a while."

"Abe just told me." Abby handed him a mug of coffee.

"Good." He downed the drink swiftly. "Come on, Trooper is waiting."

"I need to change." She glanced down at the navy dress.

"No, you will be fine, just put on your thick boots and the old coat."

He lifted it from the peg and held it out for her to put on. She allowed him to slide it on and grabbed her boots, stuffing her feet in as he urged her to hurry.

"What's the rush?"

"Trooper is waiting, and it will snow again soon, we don't want to miss the sun."

Abby followed him onto the porch. She couldn't imagine where there was to go, not in all this snow. She stepped outside into the brilliant winter sunshine.

Trooper stood by the porch.

"Where is Star?"

"Not today, I want you up in front of me. It will be warmer." He mounted up and held out his hand to her. "Come on."

Not just warmer; closer, more intimate. That was what David really wanted, his arms around her as she snuggled close against him. She stood on the edge of the porch and he maneuvered to scoop her up, just as he had that first day in town. She settled in his lap with a giggle. She hadn't giggled that first day, she had been so nervous she had been stiff, and almost shaking. They had come a long way.

He sent Trooper off along the track they had made with the horses earlier today.

They left the buildings behind and moved onto the cattle pasture. The snow was drifted and deep in places, Dave set Trooper's direction, but he allowed the horse to choose his track.

"Why are we out here, David?"

"Because this is God's country. We cannot go to church today, so we will look out over his beautiful creation, and give thanks."

He felt her sigh, and glanced down at her where she leaned against his chest.

"That is so… *good*."

He pulled Trooper up at the top of a small rise. Before them and to their left rose the mountains, to their right the cattle pastures stretched away into the distance. The world was sparkling, new and clean with its blanket of snow.

David felt her sigh again.

"It's so beautiful. Thank you for bringing me here."

"This is where I feel God. Not in that little church, with so many people showing off their piety," David murmured.

"David…"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. Church is a place we should go, we should meet with others, and give praise to the Lord. We should hear the preacher talk of his scriptures, of his words, but we shouldn't leave God in the church building. Some people see church on a Sunday as a means to forgive the fact they have ignored God all week. I would rather see him out here, every day, than behave that way."

Abby looked up at him, tears shining in her eyes.

"He led me to you," she murmured. "When I left Mississippi, God knew I was lost, and he led me to you."

David looked down at her, his beautiful wife. Maybe she was right, maybe those few seconds when he had made that momentous decision to marry her had been heaven sent?

He wrapped one arm around her and groped in his pocket for the

small box.

"Abby, I don't believe I actually asked you to marry me, not properly."

"Yes, you did," she protested.

"No, I said you could marry me, and you said all right. It wasn't a proper proposal and acceptance."

"But…" she was sounding worried.

"So I thought we could do it again." He flipped the box open and held it before her. "Abigail Marie, would you consent to be my wife?"

She gasped as she stared at the golden ring in the box before her.

"Oh, David. It's so beautiful."

"So you will consent to be my wife, and wear this each and every day?"

"Yes, yes, of course I will!" She laughed. "You are so silly. I *am* your wife."

"By law, yes. But I wanted to be sure that, deep in your heart, you really wanted to be *my* wife, not just *a* wife, now and forever."

"Yes, yes I do."

"Good." He relaxed his grip on her and removed the ring from the box. "Take off that bit of rubbish and throw it away."

She pulled off the cheap trinket and stuffed it into her coat pocket. "No, I will keep it, it may be trash, but it brought me to you." She held out her hand and he slipped the beautiful gold band onto her finger.

"There, now you are truly my wife, with my ring on your finger." He dipped his head to kiss her lips. Trooper moved restlessly beneath them. "And now it's time we went home. We have to talk with the family, tell them our decisions about the house, and about you travelling with me." He looked down at her. "We need them to understand that we are in this together." He turned his horse and rode back towards the buildings.

Their first Christmas, the first of the rest of their lives. Maybe there would be trials and tribulations, certainly there would be adventures, and hopefully children. They would face it all together.

About the Author

My name is Angela and I live in the countryside in Norfolk, UK, with my husband (who is an engineer and always busy) and my horse. My two children have left home, but I help my daughter with her horses and her whippets. I tend both house and garden, rather reluctantly, and I write and read.

For years I had woven stories in my head, when traveling and watching the world go by, when lying in bed trying to sleep, or just when I was transported by a place or an event. The result was several handwritten manuscripts, hard labour over a typewriter and eventually a single romance novel accepted and published back in 1990. Then I gave up for a time. Now the revolution has happened. Computers. The internet. Self-publishing. I felt able to inflict my creations on the world once again.

I write both historical and contemporary romance, although I prefer the historical; I enjoy the research. I have written some sweet stories as parts of multi-author series, but most (as one of my lovely reviewers said) are a little bit naughty.

I like a bit of adventure, excitement and danger. My characters have been involved on the Oregon Trail, in Indian raids in the west, and in the Crimean war. They have been variously stranded in snow storms, caught in tornadoes, kidnapped by ruffians and trapped in cellars. Generally the heroes are tough and noble, and the heroines are feisty and independent. One thing they always get is their happy ending. I don't like a book without a happy ending, so I really cannot write one.

If you have enjoyed my story it would be much appreciated if you could leave a review.

Other Books by this Author

Historical western romance and adventure

THE BUCKSKIN STALLION – Book 1
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THE BRAVE HEART

Christmas Rescue Series (sweet)
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AN ODYSSEY FOR CHRISTMAS

Mail-Order Mama Series (sweet)
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Historical romance - England and America.

The Buckingham-Brown Series-Chronological order.
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MORE REBEL THAN LADY Susannah and Flynn-1854-1856
SAVING SOPHIE Sophie and Joshua - 1857
NOT QUITE A GENTLEMAN Carel and Constance - 1848-54, 1858
FOUNTAINS CUCKOO Eleanor and Lucien - 1854-1859
ANGEL'S HERO Elizabeth and Garrett – 1860
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